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Wandering Games

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Wandering Games

Melissa Kagen

The MIT Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kagen, Melissa, author.
Title: Wandering games / Melissa Kagen.
Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021046835 | ISBN 9780262544245 (paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Walking simulator games. | Video games.
Classification: LCC GV1469.34.W35 K34 2022 | DDC 794.8—dc23/eng/20220603
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021046835

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Acknowledgments

What a ridiculous, fun, impossible thing this book has been to write! I'm grateful to so many people.

Thank you to Noah Springer, Doug Sery, and Elizabeth Agresta at MIT Press for shepherding me through this process. And thank you very much to the anonymous peer reviewers they solicited, who offered really thoughtful suggestions and critique.

Thank you to the members of the weird and delightful field of game and new media studies, who have welcomed and encouraged me with such kindness—especially Eben Muse, Lyle Skains, Bo Ruberg, Stuart Moulthrop, Sonia Fizek, Rob Gallagher, Sara Jo Cohen, and Anastasia Salter. And thank you always to Adrian Daub, my Doktorvater.

Thank you sincerely to all the students who took my course Wandering: Philosophy, Play, Performance, Protest at Stanford University (2017), Bangor University in Wales (2019), and Tufts University (2020). Special thanks to Peggy Phelan, who offered me the freedom to develop and teach that course for the first time in 2017.

Heartfelt thanks to all my students who sang, played, and helped bring to life the wandering, site-specific operas I directed at Stanford—some of the most fun I've ever had and the creative forerunner of both this book and my career in game studies. Thank you to Marie-Louise Catsalis and Nova Jiménez, who taught me.

Thank you to the amazing community of scholars and artists who participated in the Wandering Games conference at Bangor in 2019. Special thanks to the keynote presenters Kate Craig and Kris Darby, to my Bangor graduate crew who ran it so well (Eoin Murray, Isabel Vincent, Jordan Glendenning, Kate Stuart, Chris Demaude, and Jon Cook), and to those who

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wrote for the Wandering Games special issue of the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* the following year.

Thank you to my dear writing club and writer friends—Liz Spragins, Caro Egan, Lyle Skains, Karin Koehler, Michaela Hulstyn, Lucy Alford, Natasha Tanna, Lisa Barge, Jenny Strakovsky—for years of workshopping chapter drafts and articles.

To Jenny Strakovsky, my chosen family and ad hoc therapist, who has seen me through this past decade.

To my consigliere, Liz Spragins, whose brilliant editorial acumen and emotional support left a mark on every page.

To my family, all of whom are brilliant, fascinating interlocutors—Andrew, Matthew, Emily, Fern, and my parents, Valerie Stevens and Rick Kagen, who are simply the most wonderful people on the planet.

Speaking of my favorite people, thank you to Kurt James Werner for a decade of songs and an ocean of vegetable soup. He's the best academic I know, and also really cute.

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1 Introduction

What does it mean to take a walk in the gamified, late capitalist Anthropocene?

One answer could be the purposeful speed walks of Amazon warehouse low-wage workers, who race around facilities of over a million square feet to find and grab ordered products. Managers expect a worker/walker to locate 100 items per hour. "IT'S GOING TO BE HARD," warns one Amazon brochure given to temp workers when they begin. "You will be on your FEET the entire shift and walking upwards of 12 MILES per shift. (yeah, that's really far!)"[1]

Another answer could be the one I spend the next two hundred pages investigating: the virtual wanderings of the millions of players who roam around digital worlds and use them to make meaning.

It may seem a stretch to connect the two. By the end of this book, I hope it won't.

Walking Simulators are exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space. Classics of the genre emerged as artistic experiments—*The Path*, *Journey*, *Proteus*—and modifications (mods)—*Dear Esther*, *The Stanley Parable*—in the years around 2010. They were beloved by small groups of devoted fans but essentially cult favorites until the genre burst fully into the mainstream with *Gone Home* in 2013. The next generation of Walking Sims in the mid-2010s—*Firewatch*, *Virginia*, *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture, Tacoma*—refined and expanded the form. A vast array of games in the following several years incorporated aspects of the genre, creating fascinating hybrids and pointing toward the future. These hybrids are the topic of this book.

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The term *Walking Simulator* originated as a derogatory sneer, intended to denigrate games that were less violent, less task oriented, or less difficult to complete. Gamer culture's dissatisfaction with such games, and fury at the critics and players who found them valuable, formed a substantial thread of #GamerGate. But what began as the insult "Walking Simulator" has, over the past decade, become a catch-all term for games that are interested in alternative modes of expression, embodiment, environment, orientation, and community. The genre now serves as a catalyst for debates about anti-game aesthetics, changing gamer demographics, and the radical potential of poetic spatial storytelling in video games. And in its attempt to slur a certain mode of play, the term *Walking Simulator* semi-accidentally tapped into something brilliant: the vast heritage and intellectual history of the concept of walking in fiction, philosophy, pilgrimage, performance, and protest.

To give a few examples: the gendering of Walking Simulators as a "feminine" mode of engagement stretches back to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses about *flânerie* (urban rambling) and women's rights (or lack thereof) to occupy public space. Complaints that such games are boring draw their thrust from anxieties surrounding purposelessness, loitering laws, and the Protestant work ethic. Dissatisfaction with their contemplative, ambivalent, experimental tone harkens back to the founding of video games within the military-industrial complex, and the formal tension thus created when a video game functions as a meditation or pilgrimage instead of a conflict. Discomfort with their exuberant, intentional weirdness harkens back to performance art and Kaprowian *Happenings* of the late twentieth century.[2] The concept of a walking artwork itself stems from Situationist experiments of the 1950s and 1960s, which developed into the pedestrian and site-specific performance works of the 1990s through today. Within digital games alone, there are many clear precursors—the peaceful, clue-filled worlds of puzzle games like *Myst*, the exploration and clickability of point-and-click adventures, the wordy spatiality of 1980s text adventures, the 3D PC perspective in a first-person shooter (FPS). These threads all contribute to the intellectual history of the wandering game.

The title of this book is an attempt to invite these myriad discourses explicitly into the discussion of walking and games and simultaneously to broaden our focus beyond the games conventionally understood as Walking Simulators. By conceptualizing these as wandering games, I'm calling for a broader understanding of this form of play—one that draws from vast

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scholarly, popular, and historical notions of wandering rather than solely from the history of digital games.

The games considered here contain some elements of the classic Walking Simulators of the early and mid-2010s. Instead of giving a history of that genre, I show how the Walking Sim has inflected some of the most interesting hybrid games of the past several years. I analyze games that are connected to "wandering" as a theme, a formal mode, an aesthetic metaphor, or a player action. Through troubling the concept of what it fundamentally means to wander—literally, metaphorically, virtually, subversively—these wandering games tap into some of the most crucial conversations going on in gaming today. Whether we mean mimetic walking or something more like escaping, traversing, meandering, erring, resisting, returning, marching, or journeying, wandering in games exposes the multiplicitous possibilities of the simple human act of moving through space and complicates what such movement might mean within different game worlds. I develop this term throughout the following pages, complicating and problematizing it as I come to see different ways of understanding what wandering is doing in that particular game.

I primarily analyze the following works: *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *Eastshade*, *Ritual of the Moon*, *80 Days*, *Heaven's Vault*, *Death Stranding*, and *The Last of Us Part II*. These games run the gamut in terms of genre, mechanics, themes, player base, studio size, and funding. Most of them would not be considered Walking Simulators by most players; rather, they'd be acknowledged (in some cases begrudgingly) as video games with Walking Sim elements that fit more traditionally into the genres of interactive fiction, simulation, puzzle, experimental, role-playing game (RPG), action, adventure, and others. But by taking seriously the valences of walking in these works, my analysis highlights how wandering as a concept underlies games across multiple genres.

In analyzing these games from this perspective, I found the project coalescing around four major themes: work, gender, colonialism, and death.[3] None of these central preoccupations have stayed in their separate boxes throughout the chapters. Each inflects the others, and each provides a multifaceted lens through which to understand what wandering does, lacks, implies, and offers. Here were my initial framing questions, followed by a deeper consideration of each thread and how it appears throughout the book:

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- *Work*: How does wandering in games attempt to reinstate a radical boundary between work and play, subversively responding to late capitalism's erasure of that boundary? How can we understand the reaction against Walking Sims within gamer culture as a resistance to any games that criticize the unthinking replication of capitalist success paradigms? How are wandering games designed to provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play?
- *Gender*: How and why are Walking Sims often gendered female, and how does this gendering map onto long-standing discussions of female agency and presence in the public sphere? How do wandering modes queer traditional video game play?
- *Colonialism*: How does the construction of empty landscape in Walking Simulators replicate a colonizer's understanding of space and place? How does the heroic monomyth of the wanderer and the ubiquity of exploration within narrative gaming invite colonialist game design despite its postcolonial affectations? How does the negative-space violence of an emptied landscape connect to the broader conversation surrounding violence in gaming?
- *Death*: How does the central tension of traditional Walking Simulators—an *undying* PC traversing a *dead*, haunted world—help us understand ludic conventions, metaphors, and obsessions surrounding death and play?

Work

Walking Sims are uncomfortable because there is often nothing that explicitly *must* be done. This creates anxiety in those who have largely played task- and goal-oriented games (which is almost all of them) that recreate the dynamics of labor in a ludic context: complete a task, receive a reward from an authoritative power, take on a more challenging task, and some form of symbolic compensation. Such a dynamic creates a powerful feedback loop of positive feelings and accomplishment and also motives the often strong reaction against games that criticize the unthinking replication of this capitalist success paradigm. But wandering is an activity designed to provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play—or at least it can offer a provocative space for challenging (if not completely avoiding) the success paradigms and systems that have evolved around gameplay.

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This is complicated by contemporary ambivalence about leisure time, which, under late capitalism, doesn't exist, is quickly disappearing, or has been transformed into a guilt-ridden misery. Adults report feeling increasingly guilty about taking any breaks from work, especially in the millennial and Gen-Z generations, in which an anxious culture has grown up around monetizing beloved hobbies, cobbling together part-time gig work alongside unpaid internships, and being financially buried under enormous amounts of college debt.[4] In response, games have grown increasingly like labor, the better to trick us into relaxing despite ourselves.

This slippage between work and play has been part of gaming since the beginning, and it hasn't gone unmarked in the scholarship.[5] Early theorists of video games found reason to be alarmed at the powerful capitalist indoctrination wrought by the bright and cheerful techno-utopian arcade. In 1985, Fiske and Watts observed with chagrin the inverted relationship between the arcade and the factory, pointing out how the player/symbolic worker in the 1980s arcade paid a machine in order to do activities that, in a different context and with another color scheme, would be considered work.[6] For Stallabrass in 1993, computer games were "a capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture, and their political content is prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism."[7] As Carly Kocurek has written more recently, "Arcades became a crash course in spending for youths who had not yet passed into the economic order by joining the labor force."[8] Bernstein noted in 1991 that "our unrestricted play is constantly being channeled into goal-directed games; how appealing then to find a game whose essence seems to be totally useless play."[9] But at the current stage of late capitalism, this is not necessarily appealing; it's stressful and unpleasant, and it makes many of us too nervous to enjoy the meandering, antiwork pleasure offered by non-task-oriented games.

Accordingly, chapters 2 and 3 focus primarily on work, late capitalism, and the many economies and exchanges competing for a player's attention. In chapter 2, I consider how the player and PC's exploration of the archive of corpses in *Return of the Obra Dinn* serves as a heuristic for understanding the intersection between death and capitalism. In chapter 3, I analyze how the PC's love of their work in *Eastshade* operates as a perfect fantasy of late capitalist precarity.

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Gender

This is the thread I've focused on the most in previous work, and consequently the one covered in the least depth here.[10] Walking Simulators are often gendered female within gamer culture, and sometimes the presupposed masculinity of video gaming juxtaposes disjointedly with the alleged femininity of the Walking Sim. Game studies scholars (in particular Bonnie Ruberg, Cody Mejeur, and Dimitrios Pavlounis) have done significant work to articulate queer aspects of Walking Simulators—that is, the gameplay mechanics and effects that oppose traditional (straight, cis) game design.[11] But all modes of resistance, divergence, rebellion, or subversion are not innately queer—or, rather, not *only* queer. While I agree with Ruberg's provocation that "videogames have always been queer," modes of resistance, divergence, rebellion, or subversion can be read beyond (and in addition to) the concept of queerness. Naming these modes of play *queer* can even unintentionally flatten them, leaving us less likely to see the ways they also subvert (for example) capitalism or colonialism, in addition to their subversion gender norms. This project expands the smorgasbord of ways that wandering in games invites alternative modes of being and exploring and other kinds of futures.

This is not to say that the fundamental queerness (and genderedness in general) of wandering games should go unmentioned. Concerns about gender and its performance (in physical and virtual spaces) suffuse these games, and no wonder. What does it mean to be a wandering body in a game world? If your body is a normative gamer body—White, straight, cis, male, young—you might not take much notice of that body and how a ludic world reacts to it. But in nonnormative bodies, you'll notice pretty quickly. New work on the intersection between walking and queer personhood comes out all the time, building on earlier foundational texts from Ruberg, Shaw, and Phillips in particular.[12] In chapter 4, I focus especially on gender and sexuality, considering *Ritual of the Moon* as a queer, feminist take on wandering under constraint.

Colonialism

What happened to the people who used to be in this space before the wanderer wandered in? What violence might (or must) have occurred to empty

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this space, so it just seems to be here waiting for the player? It is a colonialist choice to depict ludic landscapes as mostly empty, descending from the era of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape painting in which imperialist ideologies abounded—visions of manifest destiny and land eager to be colonized.[13] When a player confronts any landscape with a gun in hand, its violent takeover feels both literally and morally easier. In Walking Simulators, despite the lack of a gun, it sometimes feels as if the violence has simply *already* been completed before the player arrived, perhaps accomplished by an entity so long ago that its discovery seems more archaeological than anything else (for example, in *Journey* or *Abzû*). But just because it occurred in the past doesn't necessarily make the spatial construction less exploitative; it just makes the player feel less guilty about it.

There are often technical reasons for these design choices, especially in smaller game studios. It's cheaper and quicker to create empty landscapes than to fill them with non-player characters (NPCs). The narrative rationale for this economic choice is then often written into the game afterward, as in *Gone Home*, where the absent family members spur the mystery forward. Kate Craig, the environmental artist of *Gone Home*, spoke about this pragmatic explanation at a conference (in response to a bunch of academics speculating on possible creative rationales for the choice).[14] Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

It's also important to clarify that there are many different ways of walking through space and claiming landscape. I tend to use the term *wandering* with its common connotation of meandering, a mode of movement much opposed to purpose-driven conquest. But as chapter 5 examines in detail, one can travel through a space in very different ways with only slightly altered affects. The valence is actually quite thin between the wanderer, the explorer, and the conqueror. And the slippage between those categories ideologically enables the violence of conquering to slip in under the guise of purposeless meandering, noble adventuring, or victorious homecoming. To draw from only one historical example, there's a famous photograph of sixty-six Jewish families at the founding of Tel Aviv in 1909 (figure 1.1). In the photograph, we can see the crowd of people holding a lottery to allocate plots of land to each family. Particularly important in the original photo is the angle; by framing the scene the way he did, the photographer avoided showing the ancient city of Jaffa on the right or the Mediterranean Sea on the left. Instead, the photograph presents Palestine as an

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Figure 1.1
Avraham Soskin, photograph of land lottery at the founding of Tel Aviv, 1909. National Archives (UK).

empty desert, seemingly waiting for colonization by the Jewish families in the foreground. After surviving millennia of anti-Semitism, pogroms, and forced migrations, the Jewish people in the photograph could have, quite understandably, seen themselves as victorious over the hideous "wandering Jew" myth (an anti-Semitic European legend pervasive since at least 1602). Here, at last, the mythic wandering Jew would find a homeland, his wandering at an end. But the people who settled in what would become Israel participated no less aggressively or violently in colonialist ideologies, occupying land they considered their own and forcing other groups into the status of transient wanderers.[15]

In short, the colonialist imaginary at the core of Western conceptualizations of space does not disappear just because a represented landscape contains no visible human inhabitants, and this holds true for in-game landscapes as well. A player wandering through an empty space is often still conceiving of that space as a place to conquer. But by emphasizing the wandering part—trying hard to stick to the connotation of meandering—the theorization in this book is an attempt to move beyond that baseline

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assumption of violence, past or future. Were players always expected to remain wanderers—not explorers, not occupiers, not conquerors—we would learn to see the spaces they move through quite differently. In chapters 5 and 6, I analyze two Inkle Studios games that encourage us to do that, and I draw from the work of a dozen postcolonial theorists to illustrate how a different way of walking through space is made more possible in certain games and less possible in others.

Death

Digression has always been metaphorical way for characters to cheat death. In *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade successfully survives her husband's daily threat to kill her in the morning by ending each night's tale on a cliffhanger; Emperor Shahryar, who has long vowed to kill his wives the morning after he marries them lest he find himself cuckolded, forestalls Scheherazade's execution each day so long as she manages to tell her stories digressively enough. In Sterne's paradigmatically digressive *Tristram Shandy*, when Death knocks on his door, Tristram sneaks out the back and runs away to France. Tristram's rambling descriptive style, in which he continuously promises to come to the point but never actually arrives, mirrors his physical journey, and both are designed to avoid the end of both the character's life and his text. Tristram refers to this directly, noting that "the more I write, the more I shall have to write."[16] Twentieth-century digressive author Italo Calvino has also been clear that "digression is a strategy for putting off the ending, a multiplying of time within the work, a perpetual evasion or flight. An evasion from what? From death, of course."[17] Digression postpones the conclusive end to a work, keeping the characters moving and avoiding their fictive deaths at the conclusion.

In the medium of video games, this phenomenon shines, as the PC's task often involves some form of digressing from quest to sidequest, task to task, trying and failing to stay alive for as many activities as possible. In the midst of all of these small deaths, the metafictional one still looms—that of an eventually completed game. But this threat lessens in many contemporary open world games, when the player can continue roaming the game world long after they've completed every mission. Chapter 7 analyzes *Death Stranding*, one such game, in terms of its overall mechropolitics (Amanda Phillips's term for the politics of death in video games).[18] In postapocalyptic

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games, another layer is added to the metaphor of digression-as-death-avoidance because the world itself has already died.

Furthermore, a complicated tension exists in the relationship between death and Walking Simulators. These works often feature an undying PC, a rarity in video games and a defining feature of the genre. Yet in Walking Simulators, the game world and game narrative tend to revolve heavily around death. Often the world is postapocalyptic, haunted, or both. This tension—between an undying PC and a dead, empty world—creates a focus on death by intentional omission. Death is everywhere and nowhere in Walking Simulators, haunting the player and the PC.

In another sense, however, this tension is imaginary, dissolving when we reconsider our expectations about the work of death. With this shift in perspective, we can also better understand why Walking Sims are often gendered female (in addition to the misogyny explanation). Since Sophocles' Antigone defied King Creon and prepared her dead brother for burial, the events surrounding death in Western fiction have frequently been gendered. In a far-too-simple articulation: to masculinity has belonged the work of creating corpses and, to femininity, the work of shrouding and mourning them.[19] In video games, this manifests as a plethora of games in which a masculinized player kills infinities of characters, and a minority of games in which a feminized player shrouds, mourns, and remembers them. While there is a way to make such work funny—think of 2015's *Viscera Cleanup Detail*—Walking Simulators are games that take seriously the work of mourning death.

Consider *Doom* designer John Romero's "tidiness theory," in which he argued that all games are about cleaning something up. If it seems that you're accomplishing a different action—eating, digging, killing—that's because every mess is different: "In *Pac-Man*, the mess is the maze full of dots. You need to clean them up to achieve your goal of cleanliness. In *Space Invaders*, the aliens are the mess. Clean them up and you reach your goal. In *Bejeweled* you are presented with a messy screen of jewels. Arrange them in groups of matching threes and you clean it up, one match at a time. Chess? Clean the board of your opponent's pieces, specifically his king."[20] In Walking Sims, you're cleaning up the story with your feet. And often, you're doing the memory work involved in emotionally tidying up the story of a corpse's life.

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In the remainder of this chapter, I situate wandering games within historical and cultural context. First, I highlight philosophical ideas of walking, counterwalking, and otherwise moving through spaces in ways that threaten to upset established power and ideology—the flâneur, the Situationist International, and the massive protest marches of the twentieth century. Next, I explain how twentieth-century performance experiments fundamentally altered our perception of fictive space—the concept of interactive and site-specific theater: Marina Abramović and Ulay's "The Lovers," Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed*, and Tehching Hsieh's *One Year Performances*. Then I trace landmarks of digressive literature that demanded respect for meandering, purposeless, anticapitalist leisure: the picaresque, Laurence Sterne, Virginia Woolf, "Hysterical Fiction" and its crossover into the digital. Finally, I turn toward the fundamentals of walking in games, explaining how these precursors resulted in the form we see today.

Subversive Walks

While observers and critics of the Walking Simulator have noted that the genre descends from bits and pieces of other art forms, what's gone largely unspoken is how the genre's formal critique of hypermilitant, patriarchal, late capitalism in gaming mirrors one of the best-recognized functions of walking: the protest. In the political-cultural imaginary of the twenty-first-century, to walk is to protest, even if its initial aims seem apolitical. When we start asking questions about walking, we are talking about the intersection between bodies and space. Walking, writes Rebecca Solnit, "is a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned."[21] When inspired by a philosophy, walking easily "becomes testifying . . . even the most innocuous parades have an agenda."[22] Individual walkers, too, come to seem political when they move through spaces hostile to their bodies or move in ways for which those spaces (virtual or physical) were not designed. To understand how walking bodies subvert space, we must first understand the norms they are subverting, and the ways the walking body creates or confronts those norms.

A panoply of twentieth-century spatial thinkers, from Gaston Bachelard to Yi-Fu Tuan to Doreen Massey, have broken open our cultural understanding of the way that space and place are constructed and perceived by

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moving bodies.[23] While walking and philosophy have been linked since the Aristotelian Peripatetics, philosophies derived around the idea of walking begin in earnest in European culture with two nineteenth-century figures: the Anglo-Germanic wanderer and the French flâneur. The former is primarily associated with the early nineteenth-century rural adventuring of young, artistic, upper-class men who are seeking something ineffable from the natural world (think of Wordsworth's clouds or the characters in Goethe's coming-of-age novels). This Romantic wanderer will feature centrally in the third chapter, where we see him reimagined as the PC of *Eastshade*. The flâneur, alternately, is associated with urban cosmopolitanism and the detached, aimless observation of modern life. Again, he's embodied by a young, artistic, upper-class, White, European man.[24] Between the Wanderer and the flanêur, European modernists became increasingly interested in how certain bodies moving through space (in cities and across invisible borders especially) made meaning.

The misogynistic gender politics of #GamerGate (especially regarding its antipathy toward *Gone Home*) dates back to Baudelaire's negative conceptualization of women walkers in the city. For Baudelaire, while a cosmopolitan woman might look in shop windows, she did not possess the artistic temperament or subversive marginality of the idling flâneur; women are there to be looked at, not to look themselves.[25] In public spaces, they are always on display, even when involved in activities demanding their sight and perception.[26] For Benjamin too, male flânerie is a totalizing, authoritative, distanced kind of observation, while female rambling through a city is low stakes and flighty, an unreflective result of commodity culture and bourgeois urban pressure.[27]

The historical flâneur was thus a male observer—both because women were not granted the scopic agency to be consider flâneurs themselves and because, when they tried, they were aggressively observed by men already in that space.[28] This confusion of spectatorship and spectacle inhibited the aspiring female flâneur from observing at a distance like her male counterpart. But as Deborah Parsons argues, the early twentieth-century saw women in the city becoming "an increasingly autonomous and observing presence," gaining scopic authority as they gained economic freedom.[29] The New Woman, the working girl, and the suffragette all became more visible, and vision-having, figures in the new metropolis.

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Predictably, narratives of women wandering in the city from this era usually depict them as sexually fallen or about to fall. Parsons and Deborah Epstein Nord have demonstrated how prostitution was coded as the female version of flânerie in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Restricted from many areas of public life, women walking in the city at unusual times or in unusual areas were often perceived not as aimless dandies but as prostitutes at work.[30] Whereas a (again: rich, White) male flâneur could separate himself from the depredations of the market and critically observe modern consumption, a wandering woman was seen as inexorably enmeshed in the network of consumption: she must be either buying (shopping) or selling (her body—as a prostitute if lower class or promenading as an eligible bride if upper class). These narratives spilled over into the treatment of actual women. Solnit retells historical anecdotes of poor young women arrested for solicitation in London and New York solely because they were caught walking alone at night.[31] The connection between female mobility and female promiscuity thus justified curtailing female motion by claiming that a wandering woman was both metaphorically and literally fast.

Drawing its ideological underpinnings from the earlier writings of Benjamin and Baudelaire, the Situationist International was founded as a revolutionary artistic movement in the late 1950s. Its participants (a group of Marxist artist-revolutionaries) crafted psychogeographic experiments that might, they hoped, remake conceptions of urban space.[32] Convinced of the dangers of commodification, advanced capitalism, and a spectacle-obsessed society, the Situationists promoted the techniques of *dérive* (drift) and *détournement* (diversion, or hijacking) to foment an anticapitalist occupation of urban spaces. These included practices like counterwalking established routes through a city, critiquing authoritarian urban structures of control that made such counterwalking impossible, and trying to reorient oneself (and one's followers) to a personal, nonalienated understanding of space. Astrid Ensslin brought the concept of the Situationist dérive to game studies, arguing that the meandering and purposelessness invited by experimental art games (like those from the studio Tale of Tales) mirrored the anticapitalist, psycho-geographical roaming of the Situationists and their twenty-first-century counterparts.[33] Situationist ideas helped to inspire the rash of revolutionary protest movements that swept across cities worldwide in 1968.

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But before and beyond the Situationists, the metaphor of the Walk had become a crucial strategy in twentieth-century anticolonialist and civil rights protest movements around the world. In the Salt March of 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led followers on a peaceful 240-mile walk to the sea, where they collected salt from seawater in protest of the British monopoly and tax on salt in colonial India. After Gandhi's arrest, Sarojini Naidu led several thousand on a similar march, meeting with brutal police violence (which was crucially recorded and disseminated by journalists), causing worldwide outcry against British policy. Civil rights leaders elsewhere found inspiration in Gandhi's methods of civil disobedience (and public walking as a way to perform it). Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* and Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedom* highlight the crucial iconography of the Walk in the context of civil disobedience.[34] Congressman John Lewis centered it in *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* and elsewhere, highlighting its spiritual dimension by citing a proverb he found inspiring: "When you pray, move your feet."[35] Protest marches long preceded the movements of the twentieth century but had more often taken the shape of angry militants threatening violence. The twentieth century, with its technologies of mass communication, saw the rise of peaceful protest marches that aimed to draw global attention to unjust spatial fault lines. The idea of meaning making through walking took on increasingly political and cultural importance in the latter half of the twentieth century, in ways that have continued and increased as people all over the world resist and subvert oppression.[36]

Finally, anticolonial conceptualizations of land ground some Native American and Australian Aboriginal philosophies.[37] Some Australian Aboriginal philosophies conceive of territory as "an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through.' "[38] These lines reflect ancestral walks and are remembered through song: "A knowledgeable person finds his way by singing the song that identifies waterholes and landmarks."[39] Shaun Hooper, a Wiradjuri man cited in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, said, "All across Australia there's pathways that people could use to move about the country. As long as you knew the protocol and the proper ceremonies associated with each place, you could use those pathways."[40] Some Aboriginal Australians call these "Footprints of the Ancestors" or the "Way of the Law," and in creation myths, they tell of a being "who wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals,

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plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence."[41] In chapter 6 especially, some of these philosophies of wandering become an increasingly important way of understanding movement in game worlds.

Pedestrian Performance

While subversive walking practices were spreading around the globe, twentieth-century performance art experiments were also fundamentally altering cultural perception of the relationship between real and fictive space. The second half of the twentieth century saw a veritable paradigm shift in the way Western culture came to perceive space as a kind of theater set—as lived-in, malleable, walkable, mappable, and replete with stories. While plenty of experimental performance artists could be featured, I highlight three in this section whose work has been imperative to the development of performative walking art: Augusto Boal, Tehching Hsieh, and Marina Abramović. Then I sketch out the genre of pedestrian performance as it emerged and now evolves (especially technologically) into the twenty-first-century.

Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theater maker and political activist, devised a critical theater practice in the 1960s and 1970s in which the urban street became a stage. Despite political persecution in his native Brazil, Boal published *Theatre of the Oppressed* in 1973, a book detailing his vision for a truly political theater. With forms like image theater, forum theater, and invisible theater, Boal and his troupe combined improvisatory exercises with direct calls to political action.[42] When engaged in invisible theater, for example, actors perform hyperrealistic scenes on provocative themes in public areas, drawing unsuspecting passersby into the drama and prodding at their complacency. The line blurs between performance and protest, actor and spectator (Boal called them "spect-actors"). In inciting and encouraging observers to intervene in unjust situations happening right in front of them—events they assume to be completely nonfictional—invisible theater orients citizens to take action against real-world injustices. Boal's elision between private and public space and the creation of a half-real, half-fictive theatrical interaction became hugely influential. His work made manifest the notion that "the street is democracy's greatest arena, the place where ordinary people can speak, unsegregated by walls, unmediated by those with more power."[43]

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Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese American performance artist, crafted his works of art from time—more specifically, from the inscriptions that time made on his body. In his series of One Year Performances in the early 1980s, he lived according to certain rules for entire years, making his art and his life coterminous. For instance, in *Time Clock Piece* from 1980 to 1981, Hsieh punched a timecard once every hour and took a photograph of himself doing it, yielding a six-minute video and a critique of pointless capitalized labor in which the artist "labors but evidently does not produce."[44] The following year, in *Outdoor Piece*, Hsieh did not enter an indoor space, instead living outdoors in New York City. As Hsieh and his chronicler and critic, Adrian Heathfield, write about this project, "Hsieh is suspended, loitering, drifting; uncertain of his destination, his course is determined by organic choices, by physical necessities or by aimless whim. He takes the route of a responsive organism, each gesture in space, each turning of the way, each decision to move or stay, returned by his self-imposed laws of action, to the barest negotiations . . . it is these decisions, these moves of privation, these transient and unrecorded life choices that take the name of art."[45] Heathfield connects Hsieh's *Outdoor Piece* to the dérive and to "Buddhist practices of meditation, migrant passages," reading it as a critique of the predations of capitalism on the worker experiencing homelessness.[46] In constraining himself to live entirely outdoors, Hsieh turns his walking body into a work of art. He commits to a small constraint that, if followed, forces a simple walk into an act that's some combination of boring, uncomfortable, and aesthetically transcendent—a model (perhaps unconsciously) replicated by early Walking Simulators.

Marina Abramović's highly conceptual performance art similarly focuses on the body—its frailty, desire, pain, and endurance—and how it can be held in suspension by the threat of other people. In Abramović's *Rhythm O* (1974), she proposed a grim sort of game in which audience members were invited to use any of the seventy-two props she'd provided on her mannequin-like body. She did not visibly resist as audience members sexually assaulted her, cut her skin with a knife, and held a loaded gun to her head. Her artistic partner and lover for much of her early career was Ulay, a male performance artist. In an iconic co-performance of 1988, Abramović and Ulay created *The Lovers: The Great Wall Walk*, in which they began on opposite ends of the Chinese Great Wall, walked toward each other for

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ninety days, and, on meeting in the center on June 3, 1988, ended their long relationship and collaboration.[47] We can trace elements of this performance to indie durational games like *Ritual of the Moon*—the ritualistic daily sequence of acts, the physically harsh environment, the doomed sense of progress, the heartbreak at the center. In terms of walking art, we can also see how *The Lovers* reappropriates a public act of devotion (a pilgrimage) into a private act (a breakup).

In the wake of such experimental walking performance art and the broader dissemination of Situationist ideas, a more accessible (and commercially successful) genre known as pedestrian performance, promenade theatre, or environmental theatre emerged.[48] Works from Wrights & Sites, Punchdrunk, and Janet Cardiff have challenged and broadened theatrical traditions, inviting audience members to walk a mobile show. These pieces are often immersive, such as in Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More*, produced in London (2003), Boston (2009), New York City (2011–) and Shanghai (2016–). In the New York production, visitors to a derelict Manhattan building wear white face-masks and interact with an intricate, many-story theatrical set based on the story of Macbeth. Audiences may follow performers, who abstractly act out the play's scenes, but primarily experience the piece by immersing themselves within the intricate world of the McKittrick Hotel. Drawing from their Situationist forebears, works of immersive theatre are often also critical of urban space, like the Wrights & Sites series of "misguided" tours of European cities.[49] Much of the work of pedestrian performance has to do with a reimagining of place, a site-specific theater in which the site is the primary object interrogated. In site-specific theater, we see a shift "from performance that inhabits a place to performance that moves through spaces."[50]

Since the turn of the millennium, advances in GPS and internet access have enabled a cavalcade of artistic walking and mapping projects.[51] Specifically, locative media projects put a technological spin on the philosophical idea of walkers co-creating and criticizing the spaces through which they walk, combining Situationism, protest, and new technologies like GPS, pervasive internet access, and mobile computing.[52] Visionary locative media artists like Gwek Bure-Soh, Andrea Wollensak, Teri Rueb, Masaki Fujihata, Eduardo Kac, Jeremy Wood, Esther Polak, Laura Kurgan, and Steven Wilson have created artworks that use new technologies to make manifest the

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poetic and political possibilities of the walking body.[53] These projects play at the intersection of a variety of late capitalist preoccupations, including contemplations of nomadic bodies, national borders, and surveillance culture.[54] Beginning in 2001, Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?* staged elaborate virtual/real-world hybrid chases in cities around the globe, in which runners in actual cities chase virtual players maneuvering around a virtual map of the same city.[55] The arts collective Social Fiction created *.walk*, in which participants walked a randomly generated route through a city, thus "'calculating' the city as though it were a 'peripatetic computer.'"[56] As Karen O'Rourke notes in *Walking and Mapping*, "Spatial annotation projects aimed to reintroduce layers of stratification into maps, allowing us to collectively haunt one another."[57] Similar projects today, like the community-generated ongoing spatial annotation project *Queering the Map*, build on the heritage of these earlier works.[58]

Finally, it bears mentioning that theorists of performance have long been interested in the way the walking body creates, destroys, or reconfigures metaphorical space through its movement. In Stanislavski's theory, the actor creates the floor of a performance through their footsteps, like a mime creates an imaginary wall with their hands. The fact that the floor of the physical stage is often coterminous with the fictional floor created by the actor striding across the stage does not mean that the fictive floor existed before the actor took a step.[59] Onstage, actors together share "common ground, as they are all reacting to and simultaneously sculpting a shared 'path.'"[60] In performative genres, the moving human body can symbolically sew space back together, metaphorically mending a broken community (illustrated in, for example, Tom Twyker's film *Run Lola, Run*, in which the titular character races back and forth between the former East and West Berlin). In their *Theatre/Archaeology*, Pearson and Shanks cite a range of landscape scholars who've written about what walking *performs*, noting the centrality of walking in understanding the past from an archaeological perspective and also in performing a landscape in the present.[61] And we see this connection vividly on display in art forms as varied as escape rooms, text adventures, live-action role-play (LARPs), and Walking Simulators like *Gone Home*, in which the player must knit a story together by walking between one archival object and another.[62]

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Digressive Literature

The idea of a literary text being metaphorically walkable has existed for centuries. But the inverse also appears in nineteenth-century Europe, when wandering was construed as reading the book of the city through one's feet. Ludwig Börne wrote in his 1824 text, *Dispatches from Paris*, that the French capital is "an unfolded book, [so] wandering through its streets means *reading*. In this instructive and delightful work, illustrated in such plenitude with images true to nature, I browse every day for several hours."[63] Wilhelm Raabe's *The Chronicle of Sparrow Lane* (1857) features the eponymous Sparrow Lane as its protagonist; the text is constructed as a succession of images and spatial relationships, a series of walks down the lane rather than in the form of a traditional narrative.[64] Börne's and Rabbe's conception of the city as a book of images becomes recognizable as protofilmic by the early twentieth century. Benjamin writes that the flâneur takes in the city as a set of discontinuous images: "They flit by quickly, like so many sheets of a tightly bound little book, the one-time forerunners of our cinematographs."[65]

Digression as a formal literary strategy grew out of the picaresque novel, a European genre popularized by Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) and characterized by a lovable, lower-class rogue protagonist who goes on a series of (mis)adventures, all of it relayed with a satirical bite. Famous early modern examples of the genre include Grimmelshausen's *Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones*, *a Foundling* (1749), and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), followed by the nineteenth-century exemplar of the genre: Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In the twentieth century, the picaresque morphed into a genre more commonly associated with serialized children's literature—for instance, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* (1945–1948) and Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby* (1955–1999). In its traditional role as trenchant social critique of vast political injustices and class disparities, however, the picaresque has remained quite available as a novelistic form—for example, in Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) or Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007).[66]

The picaresque's whimsical adventuring and narrative travels laid the groundwork for later texts, in which digressions started to occur in form rather than in plot. Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1767), perhaps the most important digressive text

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in European literature, paved the way for this twentieth-century version of the genre by adding formal digressions to what was essentially a ludic picaresque. Tristram Shandy, the gentleman in question, travels often and converses with a wide variety of people, but he's most famous for his inability to get to the point. Instead, he opines on one topic until, distracted, he leaps to another. In this way, Sterne mirrors in form the character's narrative meandering (his travels) by crafting a text that is itself meandering.

Modern digressive works of literature are not necessarily lengthy, serialized, or picaresque; they are often not filled with the delightfully droll adventures of wandering characters. Rather, modern textual digressivity intentionally unsettles a narrative through diversions away from what seems to be the central plotline and the teleological thrust of the story, whatever that has been established to be. They're often conceived as serious literature and metafictional experiments, tackling hefty themes.[67] While the digressive text may have begun in the dark comic mode of the picaresque, nineteenth- and twentieth-century digressive works take themselves much more seriously.

Digressive literary texts are a challenge to analyze, since they, definitionally, tend to be uninterested in traditional models of plot and pacing. Ross Chambers's *Loiterature* analyzes literature that is made up entirely of digressions, highlighting the three-way crossing as a metaphor for digressive texts; an author might choose which way to swerve, but a digression of some kind is a foregone conclusion.[68] Such texts, Chambers argues, discomfit the reader by their lack of progression toward a teleological aim—instead, the reader loiters. Samuel Frederick's *Narratives Unsettled* expands on this point, analyzing authors whose textual digressions offer a refreshing disruption to traditional narrative unity.[69] Claudia Albes's *The Stroll as a Storytelling Model* differentiates between narratives that feature walking or wandering, versus literature that uses meandering as a formal metaphor.[70] Texts like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* or *The Road*, for instance, tell the stories of wandering characters and discuss the difficulties of traveling, but they are written with a conventional focus on plot, character development, and narrative style. The text does not "wander"; the characters do. Conversely, works like Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* wander formally (in the reader's leaps back and forth between footnotes, for example), but don't feature wandering characters. Albes offers a list of characteristics that define the latter type as formally

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digressive texts—for example, they're overly detailed, discontinuous, and autoreflexive.[71]

But the ubiquity of these strategies in contemporary fiction can make their digressive characteristics less obvious (or less recognizably digressive). Digressive strategies once used intentionally to disorient and distance the reader under high modernism (think James Joyce's *Ulysses*) have become ubiquitous and even comfortable. James Wood problematically named the trend "hysterical realism" around the turn of the twenty-first century, pointing toward works like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* to indicate one way in which digressive fiction became a mainstream form instead of an avant-garde curiosity.[72] As he writes, "Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page," leaping from one character's backstory to another's stream of consciousness, suggesting fragments from an infinity of unnarrated lives.[73] These are novels that constantly digress and threaten to digress further, a type of exuberant storytelling that Wood finds uncomfortable and shallow. Of course in naming such a style "hysterical," in an essay primarily critiquing the work of female writer Zadie Smith (although he also names works by Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, Salman Rushdie, and Thomas Pynchon), Wood boringly participates in a long tradition of treating digressive "female writing as conversational, epistolary and lacking in style."[74] The overabundance of the text—the threat that it might spill over in any direction, at any time—harkens back to older misogynistic myths of female overabundance, promiscuity, and general too-much-ness. When Lev Grossman writes about this kind of fiction a decade after Wood, he notes that "those books rarely end without a suggestion that they could have gone on and on indefinitely. . . . You rarely meet a character, even a minor one, without getting the impression that the camera could wander off with them."[75] In 2012, Grossman declares, such texts are a relic of the past—which is interesting, because this kind of storytelling in the digital arena both preceded and succeeded its allegedly short tenure in printed literature. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, hypertext, electronic literature, and text adventure games all made literal the notion that a reader/player could conceivably wander off with any character and find a story there. Text adventure games from the 1970s like *Adventure* and *Zork* established the spatial conventions of the "room" in parser-based games, creating the expectation in the reader/player that there would be an abundance of story in any direction.[76] Classic works from the early era of electronic

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literature experimented with less concrete forms of spatial construction—for example, the networked, rhizomatic, multiperspectival structure of Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, which can be navigated by interacting with the hypertext directly or through a map or a set of paths.[77] Open world adventuring proliferated in franchises from *The Legend of Zelda* to *Grand Theft Auto*. And the decade after 2012 saw a veritable explosion of this kind of storytelling in games following the development of the technology necessary to craft truly massive open worlds. The "endlessly branching narrative tree" Grossman saw being pruned in printed literature continued its endless branching in series as diverse as *Red Dead Redemption*, *Far Cry*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*.[78]

With the commercial release of *Dear Esther* in 2012 and *Gone Home* in 2013, the Walking Simulator emerged around 2012 as well—a controversial, subversive narrative form grounded in a certain understanding of literary digressivity and quickly associated with feminine too-muchness. In such games, the player connects fragmentary pieces of disconnected text, wandering from one to the next in order to do it. The profusion of narrative material in this style of play follows the lead of Wood's "hysterical fiction"—every frayed photograph could (and sometimes does) contain a wealth of information, the tragedies and travails of an entire other person currently unknown to the player.

But beyond any other reason, Walking Simulators feel digressive because of what they seem to be wandering away *from*, what they define themselves *against*. The player expects a conflict-filled storyline; instead, there are nothing but words, and then more words. Digressive prose definitionally feels digressive because it seems to be beside the point—but what about when a piece of text *has* no central point, no central plotline? Falling from digression to digression through a linguistic quagmire, reader/players do not know how to get their bearings. Gradually they begin to suspect that there are no bearings to get. The player is not wandering away from the point; the wandering *is* the point.

Yet this fact must be hidden, or at least not explicitly stated too often in games, in life, and in literature. Virginia Woolf, a famously digressive modernist writer, began her 1925 essay "Street Haunting" with a wry celebration of the modest pencil as a pretext for wandering: "No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when

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we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner . . . under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets."[79] When, nearly a century later in 2019, Jenny Odell published a "field guide to doing nothing as an act of political resistance to the attention economy," she argued against the need for the pretext at all: "Solitude, observation, and simple conviviality should be recognized not only as ends in and of themselves, but inalienable rights belonging to anyone lucky enough to be alive."[80] Consistently, the form of her book refused to accord itself with the neoliberal attention economy's notions of good organization, offering "instead an open and extended essay, in the original sense of the word (a journey, an essaying forth). It's less a lecture than an invitation to take a walk."[81]

Walking in Games

All of this hovers—explicitly or not—in the discursive background whenever a PC wanders the world of a game. Multiple digital game genres have contributed to the conventions surrounding ludic exploration, and many scholars have worked to contextualize these conventions both before and after the Walking Sim gained prominence.[82] In this final section, I show how the Walking Sim emerged and came to ground the concept of wandering games analyzed in the rest of this book, ending with a brief overview of the subsequent chapters.

Walking Simulators emerged from the interweaving of two different impulses: (1) the noncommercial, explicitly countercultural, avant-garde thread of art that refuses to abide by conventional notions of fun and play and (2) the playful, puzzle-ful adventure-game genres that do have commercial aspirations and bank on the notion that players fundamentally enjoy the freedom to go anywhere. Both threads have had to wrestle with the anxiety of boredom versus the constraining constructs of fun, and their different answers help define which side of the divide they occupy. On one side, we find most electronic literature, early activist games, Alexander Galloway's notion of "countergaming," and Auriea Harvey and Michael Samyn's *notgames* initiative, which refused to abide by the conventions surrounding fun in their groundbreaking work as the studio Tale of Tales.[83] On the other side, we find the wide variety of adventure games that have long

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served as the playgrounds for Bartle's "explorer" player type, which are well analyzed in Reed, Salter, and Murray's recent book on the topic.[84] Finally, we find the synthesis of these forces in some of the more commercially successful and critically acclaimed indie darlings that went on to be categorized as Walking Simulators, like *Gone Home* or *Firewatch*.

The discourse on the Walking Simulator and its relationship to gamer culture is as old as the term itself.[85] Most critics date the genre's beginning to *Dear Esther*, in which the player roams around an empty island landscape, finding audio texts that tell pieces of a traumatic, a-linear narrative. The game began as a mod of *Half-Life*, offering the player a first-person perspective to walk around an unknown space, but lacking a gun or another person to confront. Since classic Walking Sims like *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable* grew out of mods of *Half-Life*, they can feel that something is explicitly lacking—they were literally modified to take a gun out of the player's hand. Consalvo and Paul emphasize that lack, calling it "a series of choices that would come to define the genre" when "*Dear Esther* takes the viewpoint and world of an FPS, and strips out the other players and the combat."[86] While they note the game borrows from genres like adventure games, interactive fiction, and immersive virtual reality, they contend that "the whole point of a Walking Simulator is to strip down a game to the point where it becomes an immersive, compelling world that players step into."[87]

This is the classic way of understanding a Walking Simulator. It's a game that takes the shape of a familiar genre and removes something crucial: a gun, a mechanic, a certain kind of interactivity, an ineffable quality of fun. As Consalvo and Paul rightly identify, the genre's name itself becomes pejorative, a delegitimizing demand that such games, having lost some crucial element, now cannot be considered "real." An urban dictionary user in 2014 traced the coining of the term to *DayZ* and the notoriously mundane, monotonous boringness of survival in its unforgiving landscape—a negative assessment of a game that was trying and failing to be fun.[88] The term especially gained in critical heft when *Gone Home* garnered acclaim from professional critics, and some of those who disagreed with that acclaim formed a thread of #GamerGate. At that point, the gendered crux of the genre's (Freudian) lack of a gun came to the fore: Walking Sims were for girls and queer people and other outsiders to gamer culture who couldn't handle the masculine complexity of "real" games.

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While the phenomenon of the Walking Simulator and its uncomfortable position within gamer culture is both unsettling and fascinating, this book is more interested in situating its legacy within broader cultural preoccupations. To enable this, I'm developing the term *wandering game*, which points toward the importance of wandering in all games. Walking Sims can be seen as one kind of wandering game; AAA games in which the player can choose to meander from one side quest to another within an open world can be seen as another; an indie game in which the player character is constrained from wandering is another; and so on.[89] Reading any game as a wandering game means that you're focusing on how the cultural and intellectual history of wandering inflects that particular game. As with any theoretical apparatus, this construct could be applied to any work, but some results would be less interesting than others; for instance, analyzing *Tetris* as a wandering game, while possible, doesn't seem that compelling to me.

It's easy to read classic Walking Simulators as wandering games. For example, by analyzing *Dear Esther* as a wandering game, we can see beyond its technical origins as a stripped-down FPS and notice how it resonates obviously and easily with philosophical and cultural traditions of wandering—as a site-specific performance, a piece of digressive literature, and a religious pilgrimage combined. As pedestrian performance art, *Dear Esther*'s assemblages of candles, notes, paper boats, and music are reminiscent of contemporary site-specific works. Based on those similarities to live performance, it's unsurprising that *Dear Esther* has found an afterlife of live performances inspired by its original virtual form—for instance, the piece *Dear Rachel*, directed by Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway, which staged an adaptation of *Dear Esther* live on Inchcolm Island, an island near South Queensferry, Scotland.[90] As a work of digressive literature, *Dear Esther* fits clearly into a long tradition of modernist digressive writing—it's abstract, fragmentary, returning again and again to important phrases or words, utilizing flashback and flash-forward, spiraling around a set of central plot points and relationships but telling them in an a-linear way. As a spiritual pilgrimage from lighthouse to beacon tower—a grief walk, undertaken in the hope that the mourner will find peace through this journey—*Dear Esther* falls neatly into the pilgrimage tradition as well. If players are familiar with these earlier traditions and norms, then reading *Dear Esther* as a wandering game is simple. One can clearly see how it's conversant in (and contributing to) the legacies of wandering thought. Other games, including

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the ones I've analyzed in the following chapters, are similarly descended from these traditions, but the resonances are not as clear as they are in a classic Walking Sim. That was my goal: to uncover how wandering thought has woven itself into the fabric of games that might not think of themselves as such.

Indeed, as games grow increasingly complicated and open world, the possibilities for misplay and wandering play become increasingly obvious. Just as philosophies of space (and who controls it) affect the way that humans traverse the physical world, the design of digital worlds enables, encourages, and forbids different movements. Players can and do take advantage of these affordances in critical playthroughs, like Brent Watanabe's "San Andreas Streaming Deer Cam," a livestreamed mod of *Grand Theft Auto V* in which Watanabe programmed an autonomous deer to wander through the fictional landscape of San Andreas.[91] In 2008, Joseph DeLappe used a treadmill and the virtual reality environment of *Second Life* to reenact Gandhi's march in protest of the salt tax, walking 240 miles on the treadmill and in cyberspace over twenty-six days.[92] Players like Youtuber ZversusA (in his series of Nature Walks of Bethesda games) or @VirtualRambling stream themselves walking through virtual environments.[93] Alenda Chang writes about the exciting possibilities of treating these virtual environments *as* environments, proposing "to refashion the game walkthrough from an expert guide for struggling players to an active exploration and appreciation of game space and place. [To do so] is a call to inhabit different game worlds and to inhabit game worlds differently."[94]

Consider Brendan Keogh's *Towards Dawn*, a project in which the author decided to walk east in an early iteration of *Minecraft* for as long as possible. If he died, his avatar would respawn at the very beginning of his journey, effectively making *Minecraft* a permadeath game for the duration of this experiment. Keogh's blog of the experience reads like the diary of any reflective explorer; he describes the landscape, his challenges to survive, his existential despair at a seemingly endless ocean, and his fear of the unknown. Eventually, after fifty-seven days, he builds a home. He'd intended to continue until he died, but his luck and talent hadn't ever run out. Instead, he chose to end the journey on his own terms. He named his home DAWN, retroactively giving his exploratory meandering the shape of a narrative arc.[95]

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Towards Dawn wonderfully exposes the ease with which a player can transform an open world video game into a wandering game—and indeed, how so many games are founded on some subliminal notion of wandering. In this case (and in that of many open world examples), that notion is concrete—the avatar walks in a journey through a landscape. In other games, the notion is abstract—the narrative meanders and digresses, by design; the meaning of a public/private space shifts based on supremacist powers and the subversive movements working against them; the player "wanders" the game into existence, connecting its many components through their feet, in the way of a pedestrian performance.

Further, the ending Keogh chooses creates a frame, giving the wandering a satisfying conclusion and imbuing it with meaning. Wandering without an end point feels very uncomfortable, but it's also the state in which much player wandering occurs. Keogh meant to die in order to give himself a natural end point—the most common choice game designers make to solve precisely this problem. But when he didn't die, he just had to . . . stop. He built a home and a garden and settled down. I read the massive anxiety around/orientation toward/obsession with death in games as a fundamental discomfort with eternal wandering (in both concrete and abstract senses). We want to stop, but we can't *just* stop.

The following chapters explore how twenty-first-century ideologies of work, gender, colonialism, and death intersect with one another in wandering games. Doing so helps to expose broader trends in gaming and contemporary culture at large. When we notice that *Return of the Obra Dinn* provides the player with an archive of corpses to investigate, rather than a more traditional archive of texts to wander around, we can better understand how death lurks in the background of all games, even (or, especially) those with undying PCs. In *Eastshade*, the player character combines the roles of Romantic wanderer and pragmatic laborer, exposing a particularly twenty-first-century fantasy of passionate work that also inflects the mythology of the game development industry. When wandering is sharply curtailed in time and space, as in *Ritual of the Moon*, the player comes to understand better the limitations forced on people in gendered, nonnormative bodies who are trying to move (or simply live) in public. Through an analysis of *80 Days*, we notice the gradations between different ways of traversing ludic space, as different game worlds invite us to perceive landscape

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as predators, as curious travelers, and as inevitable conquerors. When we come to see textual and linguistic digressivity as a form of wandering that parallels the postcolonial traversals of the PC in *Heaven's Vault*, we can more easily perceive the connections between protest, digression, and the undoing of colonialist structures through play. And when PCs are cursed to roam endlessly across postapocalyptic worlds, we can see much more clearly how an ancient notion of pilgrimage underlies big-budget, open world games, with the violence of the action serving as a distraction from a core of spiritual despair.

This book illustrates how the poetics of wandering have inflected the culture of video games across the genre spectrum, by recognizing the classic Walking Simulators of the early 2010s as both inheritors of a long artistic thought tradition and forerunners of a contemporary video game culture imbued with wandering elements. Wandering games show us different ways of relating toward gender, colonialism, work, and death. In doing so, they help us imagine what it would be—what it might take—to walk our way into a different sort of world.

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2 *Late* Capitalism: Caring for Corpses in *Return of the Obra Dinn*

In Lucas Pope's *Return of the Obra Dinn*, the player searches for human remains on an ill-fated ghost ship, using a skull-decorated pocket watch to return to each corpse's moment of death. This pocket watch, the major mechanic of the game, is called the "Memento Mortem," a literal and iconographic encouragement to remember death. We really don't need the reminder—death is everywhere. With the help of the Memento Mortem, we find ourselves tripping over dead bodies, each more gruesome than the last. We pore repeatedly over the few grainy clues we're given, wondering what catastrophes could have caused these deaths and cringing at the fate of the doomed sailors. But diegetically, our sympathy and curiosity are incidental to the game's driving purpose. The PC is an insurance adjuster for the East India Company, brought aboard only to do a job: to determine and officially record the name and fate of every individual on the sixty-person manifest. Each person aboard who lived and died during the fateful voyage of the *Obra Dinn* will be reduced by the game's conclusion to a monetary value, owed either by or to the insurance company. The game's power hinges on the fact that the player, rather than the PC, is drawn into the complex web of relationships, rationales, and motivations that could help to explain who these people were and how they might have behaved in the moments before their deaths. *Who were they? How did they die?* We want to know, and so does the insurance adjuster, but our reasons for caring are fundamentally different the adjuster's.

This chapter considers the haunted nature of wandering games, and the reasons that death in Walking Simulators feels simultaneously so present and so absent. Walking Sims tend to engage in a mode of play that Marie-Laure Ryan would call "internal–exploratory interactivity" and Henry

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Jenkins would call "embedded spatial storytelling."[1] They offer the player an environment empty of people but filled with objects that speak to the characters and events that used to exist here. These "archival adventures" present ludic repositories of archival material, carefully arranged, that the player transforms into a coherent narrative by the way they navigate the given environment.[2] Archival adventures are haunted spaces, trapped liminally between life and death, with the player's actions bringing a dead and empty world back to life.

Obra Dinn serves as the case study for this chapter because it's explicit about its obsession with mortality. In most archival adventures, the player sifts through texts and personal effects—books, sketches, a favorite piece of furniture or item of clothing—to attempt to situate those objects within the context of a broader story. In *Obra Dinn*, the archival objects are themselves corpses—rotting remains that fantastically transport the player, via the ever-present Memento Mortem, to the precise moment when living people become archival and archivable objects. Margaret Schwartz argues that beginning one's analysis "from the starting point of the corpse" invites a materialist reading of dead bodies, "inquir[ing] precisely into the relationship between the material and the textual."[3] Drawing from Schwartz and from Amanda Phillips's writing on the intersections between necropolitics and game mechanics, I consider how the corpses in *Obra Dinn* serve not only as a liminal link between life and death but as a heuristic for understanding the conventions surrounding death and capitalism in wandering games.[4]

I begin with the corpse as an archival object in the context of the game. Next, I take a step back and consider how death suffuses Walking Simulators in general. Despite their (somewhat complicated) reputation as peaceful ludic environments, these games fully participate in the morbid enthusiasm for death and violence that so characterizes the history of video games. But players in these games explore the aftermath of death rather than causing it directly, shifting the temporal orientation. Accordingly, I then consider that question of temporality more closely, showing how *Obra Dinn* sates the player's desire to grasp the moment of death. The archival poetics of the game hinge precisely on the mythical existence of that impossible moment when the living person transforms into archival object. I conclude by discussing what that process of objectification means in the harshly capitalistic world of *Obra Dinn*—a world in which every death, no

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matter how fantastic, must eventually be reduced to a number in a ledger and nothing more.

An Archive of Corpses

To begin where *Obra Dinn* begins, consider the corpse. Schwartz poses a "theory of the corpse as a communicative object."[5] If humans are forces of subjectivity, self-expression, and individuality, corpses present the opposite challenge: they are silenced, material objects, important because they represent what used to be a subject. As Schwartz notes, we encounter a present absence with a corpse; indeed, "a materialist media theory of the corpse gives a space to the body as the *site of difference* between the deceased and her legacy."[6] In this difference, Schwartz finds the corpse to be a "literal figure for mediation, an object in transition between one kind of being and another."[7]

Obra Dinn offers the player a chance to explore this notion quite literally, as each corpse aboard the ship presents itself as a material object that opens a portal to a previously living subject. The player begins by encountering a corpse, often by following the buzzing flies to a pile of rotting remains. The corpse's materiality, in other words, is made explicit by the semirealistic rot taking place all over the ship. When the player is close enough to touch the corpse, the Memento Mortem pocket watch appears. The player clicks once, and the watch spins backward, blacking out the screen entirely. Staring at that empty screen, the player can only listen to the characters' voices as they speak the final words this doomed individual heard or said while the text of those lines of dialogue appears in white. If the words are spoken in a language other than English, a translation appears as well. Suddenly the blank screen fills with a three-dimensional still diorama, rendered in a grainy, dithered one-bit black-and-white visual style that looks a little like a woodcut rendering. The player is free to walk around within the scene, closely examining characters, objects, and any details that might help to establish identities and motives. Suddenly the scene disappears again, and a book opens to the page on which the player now must record the answer to two crucial questions: *Who was this? How did they die?*

In answering these questions, the player engages with another idea from the scholarship on mediated corpses—the centrality of inscribing, recording, and archiving. "Technologies of inscription and archive are central to

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the modern encounter with the dead," writes Schwartz.[8] The archive itself has long been theorized as a site of dead materials brought metaphorically back to life by a scholar who uncovers a hidden story in between desiccated papers. Players take on the role of intrepid scholar scouring a dark library for forgotten secrets.[9] Traditionally that archive is composed of written, textual materials, a meaning shared as well by library science and popular use of the term.[10] However, an alternative understanding of the archive as an assemblage of embodied, affective orientations and gestures has subsequently grown out of performance and queer studies.[11] When we consider the archive as embodied practice, enacted again and again, passed from body to body, video games become fundamentally archival—not in the sense that they record some pivotal piece of written information but in the sense that they script a certain bodily performance (for both human and avatar). Rebecca Schneider writes about embodied memory serving an archival function—an archive of flesh—such that "remains do not have to be isolated to the document. . . . [The body] becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory."[12]

The idea of a flesh archive takes on a whole new meaning when it comes to *Obra Dinn*: an archival adventure with a complex relationship between fleshy remains and written text. The corpses serve as fleshy remains that, before our eyes, have rotted mostly into bone. To remember them, we return to the logbook and its two questions: *Who is this? How did they die?* The player can either guess that character's name and cause of death, which is then scribbled into the book in handwriting, or they can further explore the 3D scene and consider it (and other scenes) as long as they'd like. But the instant the player has correctly guessed the full information on three pages, the game interrupts itself with a satisfying musical beat: "Well done. You've guessed three more fates correctly." The book flips to each correct page and shows the player's guesses as they transform from handwriting into printed type. It's a performance of ultimate epistemic certainty: the archival messiness of the handwriting, with its play between uncertainty and certainty, guess and corroboration, is neatly subsumed into clear, printed text.

This is the opposite of the way flesh and text usually work in games. The objects one finds, the objects with narrative meaning imbued in them, tend to be textual. For example, in *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you touch a text to activate a body. The player wanders around an archive of textual materials (such as books, letters, and poems) and revivifies a playable memory by

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touching a textual object. In *Obra Dinn*, it's the reverse: you touch a body to activate a text—the script of the scene—followed by a dioramic still image, after which you write down the knowledge you've gleaned by examining bodies. It's an inversion: rather than an archive of textual objects that turn into bodies, *Obra Dinn* offers a flesh archive of dead bodies that must be converted into text.

The next section broadens slightly to examine the centrality not just of corpses but of death in general in Walking Simulators, a genre supposedly uninterested in violence. Teasing apart death from violence, I argue that Walking Simulators may be less violent than other genres, but they still revolve around death; they're just more interested in what happens after.

Death and Its Aftermath

The relationship between video game and real-world violence is fraught, and it remains one of the most well-trodden research areas in game studies. But undeniably, video games as an art form are obsessed with death and violence. Since Steve Russell's *Spacewar!*, the mechanic of "shoot" has been arguably more fundamental than even "move" or "jump" in game design. Violence also predominates as a theme, especially after *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D* kickstarted the FPS, a genre predicated on killing hordes of enemies as quickly as possible. Other video game genres—strategy, sports simulators, adventure, roguelikes, RPGs—might portray violence as more strategic, cartoonish, abstract, or athletic, but the violence remains central. And importantly, as Carly Kocurek notes, the cultural conversation and handwringing focused on violent video games serve to center that violence even more explicitly: "Violent games become the most popular in part because they draw the most attention, which further normalizes them . . . this discussion [of violence], in reaching people who would not necessarily be playing games, renders this violence an integral part of video games *as a medium*."[13]

This focus is no accident. Julian Stallabrass points out that video games' focus on war and their status as "capitalist and deeply conservative forms of [mass] culture" emerges from their reification and idealization of the American military-industrial complex.[14] As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue in their now-classic *Games of Empire*, video games are "*a paradigmatic media of Empire*—[of] planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—and

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of some of the forces presently challenging it. . . . Born out of the same military research matrix that generated the personal computer and the internet, virtual games continue to be a testing ground for some of the most futuristic experiments in digital technology."[15] Most games are (and always have been) what they call "Militainment."

But as Kocurek notes, all violence in video games is not created equal. The problem is not violence as such but rather who gets to cause it. She explains that *Death Race* "triggered outrage not only because it was violent, but because it depicted violence which questioned the state's monopoly on legitimized violence and did not follow culturally accepted narratives of violence, such as military or police violence, or the western."[16] The seeming obviousness of video game violence is not, then, a random historical quirk, something that just whimsically happens to be a part of the art form, but a carefully constructed phenomenon existing within certain acceptable limits, the boundaries of which are delineated by the games that try to go beyond them. The relationship between violence and video games is a feature, not a bug. And far from an upside-down, carnivalesque power fantasy, video games were born and remain a medium that inscribes and reinscribes only the socially acceptable types of violence of the twenty-first-century imperium.

The intersection between video games and death (instead of the violence which causes it) has drawn less attention, but multiple scholars have done crucial work on the topic: Amanda Phillips, Megan Adams, and Bonnie Ruberg, among others.[17] Gabby DaRienzo hosted an exceptional podcast from 2016 to 2018, *Play Dead*, in which she interviewed game developers (including Lucas Pope) on how they think about death in their games.[18] In the introduction to his special issue on video gaming and death, John W. Borchert writes of "games as spaces where death is contested, an object of play, and subject to playfulness."[19] When death becomes such a playful and played-upon limit, then *permadeath* takes on that charged finality that regular old death used to have, as Chang, Constantino, and Soderman point out.[20] Whether the player is constantly dying or successfully managing to evade it, the player's relationship to their character's death within a ludic system serves as the core of most digital games, grounding the experience of play, the stakes of loss, and the flow of the narrative.

With this in mind, we can better understand the foundational tension caused by Walking Simulators: exploratory, nonviolent games without

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points, goals, or tasks in which the undying PC wanders around a narratively rich space. Despite the ludic safety of the Walking Sim—your avatar usually cannot die, nothing will suddenly attack you and you will not be expected to attack anything else—the environments of these games are still suffused with violence and death, even as they are dismissed as not violent enough by those who see that quality as an insult. *Gone Home*'s narrative tension arises precisely from the player's anxiety that everyone in their family is, if not dead, then unpleasantly missing from a creepy, unknown house. *Dear Esther* features the story of a suicidal man whose wife was killed by a drunk driver. In *Firewatch*, the protagonist, Henry, constructs wild conspiracy theories to explain what is eventually revealed to be a child's tragic death in a rock-climbing accident. In *What Remains of Edith Finch*, you explore the boarded-up ancestral home of the cursed Finch family, all of whose members are now dead (as the PC soon will be). In *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, all the humans have disappeared in a mysterious contagion, leaving behind only a bucolic landscape and audio clues as to their fates. In *The Path*, six avatars of Little Red Riding Hood travel through a forest to meet their abstract demise at the fangs of six different wolves.

It therefore seems a misrepresentation to claim Walking Simulators as somehow removed from death or violence. Rather, it makes more sense to recognize them as games about the aftermath of death. In most games, you, the player, are the bringer of death. You enter a peaceful scene and kill everything in it. In a Walking Simulator, it's the reverse: you enter a place in which death has occurred or might have occurred, and you try to make sense of it. Your work is that of shrouding and mourning rather than killing. You're participating in the ancient, seemingly universal practice of "caring for the dead body in some fashion."[21] But Walking Simulators are not nonviolent at all; they are about what happens in the aftermath of violence.

The question of timing rather than the existence of violence, then, becomes pivotal in our developing theory of wandering games. In *Obra Dinn*, as in many other Walking Simulators, the linear time line is annihilated: you begin in the final chapter, with the final four deaths, and move roughly backward as you travel down into the lower decks. It is impossible to win without replaying certain memories. On first viewing them, you don't have any idea what you're looking at, and only on the second or sixteenth viewing, after exploring many other death scenes, do you know

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enough to gauge why a certain detail might matter. Pope arranges the narrative in this way because it's more interesting—once you've seen a character's death, you are much more attuned to their mundane actions in earlier scenes—and for more practical, material reasons: a corpse is required before it's possible to access a memory through touching that corpse. Therefore, the corpse must exist first in the ludic time line. The player moves backward in time, leaping from one corpse to another, starting at the end of the story after the ramifications of violence have played themselves out, working backward toward the source.

The *Obra Dinn* suffered more fatalities than most other voyages. All sixty crew members succumbed to some combination of murderous crew members, violent storms, contagious fevers, and, of course, the gargantuan and truly terrifying sea monsters summoned by several poisonous shells. The dropdown menu of possible deaths each character may have suffered speaks to the game's exuberant goriness. You spend your time puzzling thoughtfully over whether that character has just been spiked or fully decapitated, squinting at the low-resolution image of a pierced neck to determine if the head has been fully separated from the body. This gory reverence for murder relates to Phillips's idea that games make gruesome death into fun. They describe "how the simulation of death as both technological feat and gamic goal produces a playground of mortality in which new orientations towards death and dying might be invented, rehearsed, and even normalized."[22] The twitchy, technical expertise required for successfully shooting someone in the head, they write, turns the act of shooting into a ludic goal and divorces it from the ramifications of actual death. The famous term *necropolitics* comes from the eponymous essay by Achille Mbembe, who reads "politics as the work of death" and sees sovereignty "expressed predominantly as the right to kill."[23] Combining Mbembe's necropolitics with video game "mechanics," Phillips coins the term *mechropolitics*: the politics of dying in video games. "Mechropolitics," they write, "makes death fun, not merely as a visual spectacle but as a co-operative activity performed with a machine and encouraged by the mechanics of game and system design. These systemic relationships, in turn, influence how we think and behave within real world deaths."[24]

Obra Dinn shares its complex mechropolitics with most other Walking Simulators. On one hand, the player cannot die throughout the game. Not only is there no permadeath; there's not even a possibility of death for the

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PC. On the other hand, (as in *Edith Finch*) you play the death scene or near-death scene of every crew member. The player brings each character briefly back to life, only to kill them again in the playthrough of their death scene. By touching each corpse, you enliven the archive.

In this sense, the bodies aboard the *Obra Dinn* share something with John Sanders's conceptualization of haunted cartridges—those evocative material objects that "help to elucidate unsettling ambiguities between data and spirit, save files and human identity. . . . The information-carrying cartridge is revealed to mirror the body/soul duality so familiar to humanity, housing data which may be possessed, altered, and corrupted by entities unknown."[25] When writing on haunted cartridge narratives, Sanders points out how the glitchiness of a game cartridge makes explicit the Freudian uncanniness of all video games: looping repetitions, doppelgängers, liminality, a mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the return of the repressed, and so on. These, he says, are the sort of uncanny experience that video games have made comfortable for us, but "the familiarity gamers have with these uncanny operations conceal the inherent strangeness. . . . all that it takes to unmask video games as the uncanny media they are is to expose these operations, even for a moment."[26]

The remains aboard the *Obra Dinn* function in a similar way. We are used to encountering corpses in video games—indeed, we are used to creating the corpses in video games—but the pocket watch makes us trip over them, literally and metaphorically. These are not clean gamic bodies that will dissolve when we've dealt them the fatal blow. They are grotesque, depicted in morbid decomposition, alerting the player to their location with the presence of swarming flies. And you cannot search each body and loot it of useful objects; you can only "loot" it of the moment that person died. The next section considers how such a moment gets constructed.

Rendering the "Moment"

Dying rarely occurs in a single moment. As Jennifer Malkowski writes in *Dying in Full Detail*, the so-called moment of death is "especially resistant to mediated visibility . . . a supposed point of transition from living being to corpse that has fixated image-makers and audiences, and that obscures the more frightening reality that dying is a durational process—a long one, for most Americans."[27] Because of the way that dying works, she notes, it

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used to be nearly impossible to record a single moment when living human became corpse. The process of dying simply takes too long to be captured by the impatient camera, at least until the advent of video. Malkowski argues that Americans' conception of death (and their certainty that it arrives in a visible "moment") is fully mediated through "fiction film and television . . . because individuals' access to unmediated dying declined so dramatically in the twentieth century."[28] But the romantic notion of a single moment of death continues to hold sway. We've seen that moment so often in media that it really feels like it should exist.

Obra Dinn fully revels in (and contributes to) this mediatized understanding of death as a singular moment: the moment when *something* exits a body, leaving behind a fleshy, inert shell. For most of the sixty humans aboard the *Obra Dinn*, the Memento Mortem returns the player to the scene several seconds before the death itself. In some scenes, the character has already received the death blow—for instance, the young midshipman who crawls back to his cabin to die after he's knifed for overhearing a mutineer's plot. In others, the death scene comes as a surprise for the doomed character, and the dialogue before their death offers a slice-of-life snapshot of courtesies and everyday actions. In some rare cases, the "death scene" is not a death scene at all, but rather the moment when the character escaped from the *Obra Dinn* on a lifeboat. From this, we can note that the watch returns us to a moment of leaving—a soul leaving a body or a survivor escaping a disaster. In either case, it is a *moment* that is crystallized, held suspended for the viewer's curiosity and detection. Malkowski writes that "studying the corpse to retrieve a sense of the last moments of life" used to be a common war correspondents' practice, and the player of *Obra Dinn* accepts this notion fully.[29]

For documentarians, creating a legible moment of death on film became, in the early days of film, not only a technological and creative challenge but an ethical quandary. How could a photographer justify the hours-long, vulture-like vigil they needed to practice in order to document something that would visually read as a precise moment of death? To answer that question, Vivian Sobchack outlines a typology of gazes for the documentarian recording a death: the accidental gaze, the helpless gaze, the endangered gaze, the interventional gaze, the humane stare. These, she writes, can each be considered ethical, but "there is a sixth visual form which is ethically ambiguous and suspect . . . this form, unsure of its ethical grounding and

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allegiance, can be called the 'professional gaze'."[30] The professional gaze, she writes,

> is marked by ethical ambiguity, by technical and machine-like competence in the face of an event which seems to call for further and human response. . . . The concern for getting a clear and unobstructed image, and the belief that it is possible to strip that image, that representation, of human bias and perspective and ethicality so that it is "objective," indelibly marks the inscriptions of the professional gaze with their own problematic ethical perspective in the face of both human mortality and visual taboo.[31]

Obra Dinn, though fictional, presents itself as if it were documentary—precise, calculating, and supremely interested in facticity. Like Pope's previous work, *Papers, Please* (2013), the meat of the game occurs in the completion of paperwork. The PC of *Obra Dinn* is at work. His gaze at these bodies is professional, and Sobchack's description of that gaze fits him perfectly. He silently observes each scene, then records information as though it were objective—as though it were possible to "strip that image . . . of human bias and perspective and ethicality so that it is 'objective.' "[32] The logbook then confirms or denies the facts he's written, offering a perfect epistemic clarity in tidy pockets of nine facts at a time, transforming his handwritten scribbles into typed text. Objectivity, confirmed.

The professional gaze is not, however, the way the player observes the bodies they encounter, which creates an interesting tension between the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the observer. The PC is a professional at work, but the player is at leisure. The player might conceivably be considering these corpses with a sort of professional contemplation (if, for example, they were writing a book chapter about them), but they are much more likely to be viewing them with something akin to Sobchack's humane stare, which "inscrib[es] the intimacy and respect and sympathy it feels with those who die in its vision" or "may fix itself as shock and disbelief, its gaze 'hypnotized' by the horror it observes."[33] The camera's view might be professional, but the player is more often watching in horror, flinching but unable to look away.

While the camera may not inscribe much intimacy, respect, or sympathy, those reactions are evoked in the player nonetheless by the voice-overs and the puzzle mechanic. *Obra Dinn* begins each encounter with a corpse-as-thing, but the puzzle mechanic nudges the player into an encounter with the corpse-as-formerly-alive. You can hear the voice of the person about to

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die, whether they know they're doomed or not. The well-acted voice-over scenes (audible in the seconds before each dying body appears) rearrange the time line into snippets of linearity, as you first hear the living being and only afterward see their body in the thralls of death. The puzzle mechanic, then, pulls you into an intimacy with these people. You're drawn into a conversation with those who are about to die, trying to understand them. Did he mean what he said about the second mate, or was that quaver in his voice an indication of sarcasm? Was he trying to run away here, or was he running to help the friend he played cards with a few days ago? In building these fictive scenarios, in reliving death scenes again and again to search for clues, your compassion for the doomed characters increases.

In the final section, I examine the tension between the PC and the player, arguing that it exemplifies not only a Marxist alienation of workers from their labor but a late capitalist alienation of the player from their play.

Late Capitalism

"All digital games set up systems of value, exchange, accumulation and expenditure," Seth Giddings writes.[34] Drawing from Fiske and Watts, Giddings writes, "The player pays to 'work', feeding the slot with coins, thus alienated work is inverted."[35] Digital games in 1985, when Fiske and Watts were writing, seemed like a funhouse mirror of the assembly line, but in the realm of ostensible leisure. For Stallabrass, the economics internal to games "obsequiously reflect the operation of consumer capital for they are based on exchange, an incessant trading of money, munitions or energy, a shuttling back and forth of goods and blows."[36] As digital games grew increasingly complicated, Giddings notes, these internal economics no longer seemed as simple as one-to-one replication of capitalist norms, nor do they seem "subversive of capitalist work culture."[37]

In this and similar scholarship, digital games have emerged as symbolic of a late capitalist ethos, a term that includes both an economic system and a cultural ideology. Late capitalism, an early twentieth-century concept with roots in German economic theory and Adorno and Marcuse's Frankfurt school of cultural criticism, emerged as a force in the English-speaking world with Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.[38] For Jameson, the term gestured toward the postmodern inability to form a frame of reference outside capitalism. There could

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be no distance, no objective standpoint from which to judge or consider, only the sublimation of all culture, leisure, and entertainment into the inescapable universe of capitalist commodification. Since Jameson, and particularly since 2016, "late capitalism" has become "a catchall phrase for the indignities and absurdities of our contemporary economy, with its yawning inequality and super-powered corporations and shrinking middle class."[39] While inequality isn't new, twenty-first-century technology has highlighted it and enabled the proliferation of images of horrifying injustice. These injustices saturate public consciousness and bring with them a widespread critique of everyday life. As Mike Konczal notes succinctly in an article by Annie Lowrey, "austerity, runaway top incomes, globalization, populations permanently out of the job market, competition pushed further into our everyday lives. These aren't new, but they have an extra cruelty that is boiling over everywhere."[40] The term *late capitalism* indicts the whole structure on multiple levels: the economic system that creates billionaires with offshore tax havens, the uncompassionate societal shrug when that billionaire's employees are not offered health care, and the saccharine narrative that goes viral online when the employee's five-year-old raises $1,000 for her daddy's cancer treatment with her lemonade stand. It is in combination that these elements encompass late capitalism.

This combination (and the dose of "extra cruelty") comes to the fore at the end of *Obra Dinn*, when the PC submits his account to his employers. The final judgments are not remarkably unjust overall. And these minor injustices, while surprising, do not explain the player's discomfort at the conclusion of the game. Having spent a dozen hours analyzing the minutia of these grainy images, deducing every possible meaning of a hug or a raised hand, players find themselves startled by the starkness of each description. This final tally records what happened, but players recoil at the limited truth of each record. A few words on each person's fate and actions does not seem like enough. The monetary value ascribed to each death seems entirely wrong. The very concept of accounting for these extraordinary, fantastical events with such cold calculation and limited notation seems bafflingly inaccurate—even though, technically, it's not. The record offers no overall summary, warning, or conclusion. The player signs a certification that the statements are accurate, and the book is closed.

In some cases, the final judgments *do* seem unjust when placed into the context in which these events occurred. The East India Company (EIC)

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assigns demerits to characters for "abandoning ship" when they drown during a kraken attack. When one sailor, doing his best to shoot a cannon at the gigantic kraken attacking the ship, gets crushed by the kraken after lighting the cannon's fuse and then the resulting shot accidentally hits a superior officer, the insurance adjuster's log will not accept the officer's death as "shot with a cannon by the beast" or even "shot with a cannon." Only after the player lists the laborer as the cause of death (a man who was, let's recall, being crushed dead against the cannon by the kraken's tentacles as his gun went off), will the book admit the death into its formal record. There are no accidents, only insurance claims. Context is important only insofar as it serves the vested interest of the insurance company.

The PC, of course, has not caused these deaths; they have simply been employed to record them. It's a position of supreme omniscience and limited agency. But the mundanity, the lack of reaction from the insurance adjuster, is supremely late capitalist in its smug satisfaction with an inhumane and decontextualized system. The PC, at the conclusion of the game, sits calmly in their office, puts away the tabulation, and moves on smoothly to other tasks. All the player's curiosities and frustrations seem not to touch the adjuster's preternatural calm. What about all the sea monsters? The curse of the shells? Is this character not planning to distribute this crucial information to anyone else at the very least? The adjuster seems nearly psychopathic in their combination of zeal for the job and total disinterest in anything lying beyond the bounds of his remit. Once the final numbers are tallied, they seem perfectly satisfied to walk away.

This satisfaction on their part (and frustration on yours) highlights the way that gaming under late capitalism alienates the player from play, a step further than a Marxist read of the player-as-worker who is alienated from work. From a Marxist perspective, the insurance adjuster's disinterest makes a certain, depressing sense: their job is done, and the object here was always to complete a job to an employer's satisfaction. The character is at work, even if you are at play. Why should this official care personally about the fate of the laborers aboard the *Obra Dinn*? Perhaps they even do care, and we are not privy to their personal reaction. But when the PC reduces our beloved characters to a number in a ledger, it alienates us from the emotional connections we have been ludologically encouraged to build with the dead crew members.

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"Within late capitalist leisure there is a clear moral preference for more productive, work-like play," Giddings writes, and nowhere is this clearer than in Lucas Pope's gamemaking.[41] The critical bite that characterizes both *Obra Dinn* and *Papers, Please* stems from the conflation of work and play. *Obra Dinn*'s mechanics insert a Brechtian distance, reminding you that these characters are simultaneously people you care about *and* financial liabilities for an insurance company. But you, the player, have no financial interest in the fates of the crew—you are drawn into their story for the opposite reason than that of the character you're playing. Engaging with the mundane context enables you to solve the bloody endings. Only by observing the ship's surgeon tending a patient, or by seeing a topman in the rigging in an early scene, can you correctly figure out various fates and enter them into the book; it is only through noticing the characters' attachments and desires—their humanity—that you are able to solve the mysteries of their deaths. As Rob Gallagher writes about another game in which one plays as an insurance adjuster: *"Tacoma* . . . is very much preoccupied with labor politics and the ethical quandaries posed by datafication. . . . These recordings allow us to determine what really happened, attesting to the humanity of Tacoma's workers and the inhumanity of their employers."[42] In *Obra Dinn*, the Memento Mortem recordings perform a similar function—allowing us to determine what really happened—but only the final record submitted by the nameless insurance adjuster attests to the inhumanity of the employers. *Obra Dinn* pulls you into caring about these laborers as people and then reminds you, in the sallow final report, that their employer did not care about them at all, not in any way that mattered.

The player's care, however, matters quite a lot. In her conclusion to *Dead Matter*, Schwartz writes about Agamben's concept of "bare life," the kind of poverty-stricken existence under which "life is reduced to survival and death constitutes only a release from toil."[43] These lives, she writes, come into public consciousness only through their labor, and their deaths become visible only because the absence of that labor has made those bodies and lives noticeable. "Bare life treats the flesh as meat. We pay only as much as keeps the worker alive. When he dies, we complete the process of extirpation by moving on, filling the post, training the replacement. The slow stillness of grief has no place. One cannot lie down for six months and cry."[44] In *Obra Dinn*, the PC's employer treats these laborers as bare

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lives—replaceable cogs in an industrial machine, unnoticed and unremarkable until the violence of their deaths (and the disappearance of sixty of them at once) attracts industrial attention. But you, the player, learn not to see them that way. You are the one who does the work of mourning them. You bear witness. You slow down and freeze time, and you stand still inside their last moments. You notice the particularity of this or that death, the personality of this or that life. The doomed souls aboard the *Obra Dinn* are not, by the end of the game, bare lives to you.

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3 Romantic Precarity: *Eastshade* as a Fantasy of Work

Eastshade is a glorious place to be a wandering artist. The dappled air sparkles, beckoning you into villages brimming with cozy cheer. Sky, sea, beach, and forest shimmer with the promise of beautiful, contemplative adventures, complete with a flutter of golden glitter whenever you encounter a new place. Running water and birdsong complement the serene soundtrack, accompanied by the scribble of a pencil on paper whenever you update a quest. Anthropomorphic NPCs endear themselves to you with their gentle grumbles and requests, which never seem high stakes (even when they narratively ought to be quite important). Between the golden light, the supernatural beauty of each biome, and the low-pressure tasks given to you by kind, friendly creatures, playing *Eastshade* feels like the loveliest respite for anyone who imagines that they too might find it quite satisfying to travel to a faraway land and spend their days drinking tea and pursuing creative passions.

In reality, it is of course exceptionally difficult to travel and work in a foreign country as an itinerant freelance painter. Practicalities intrude immediately on the dream—language barriers, taxes, travel delays, terrible weather, homesickness, instability—such that the precarious life of a wandering artist little resembles the fantasy of what that life might be. *Eastshade* revels in this gap, offering the player a fantasy tailor-made to soothe the particular terrors of late capitalist precarity in 2019, and doing so with such charm and panache the player hardly recognizes it happening. Indeed, *Eastshade* works so well as escapism precisely because of how expertly it anticipates (and preemptively counters) any activity, ideology, or inconvenience that mars the dream of being a wandering artist.

This chapter looks at how *Eastshade* delivers a fantasy of late capitalist precarity. First, I delve into the aesthetic and sociocultural mythmaking

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surrounding the wandering artist, a character who became increasingly important during the nineteenth century. I show how the player's response to the landscape traces out the relationship between aesthetic theories of the sublime, the beautiful, and the law of gentleness. In addition to embodying the early nineteenth-century Romantic ideal of the wanderer, the player is also put into the role of that character's more pragmatic and impoverished cousin: the mid-nineteenth-century artisanal journeyman who migrated in search of work. In the second section, I weigh more carefully the balance of economic considerations that drive the player in *Eastshade*, closely reading the player's actions within the context of millennial anxieties about precarity, love, and labor. Finally, I consider *Eastshade* as a labor of love of its programmer and analyze how Eastshade Studios embeds itself within intersecting late capitalist ideologies as an independent game developer. The studio's careful performance of itself—precarious, ambitious, dreamy yet practical—mirrors rather beautifully the tension embodied in the wandering artist/laborer PC of the game they created.

Romantic Wandering

Everyone in *Eastshade*, from the villagers in Lyndow to the city folk in Nava, expect you to want to wander through the countryside on foot—in part because you're an artist, in part because you're a tourist, and in part because everyone agrees on the unparalleled beauty of the landscape. Some of them announce those expectations explicitly, like Emine, who "imagine[s] you'll be traveling all around this island, being a tourist and all." While players can eventually find ways to travel more quickly—conveyances like bicycles and carts or psychotropic tea that warp-travels you to your desired location—these methods pale in comparison. As Tifa says if you try to hire a cart too early, "You're a newcomer and you've never been to Nava! It's not so far and the walk is lovely. Everyone going to Nava for the first time should approach by foot. I won't be the one to cheat you out of an enriching experience." Wandering around Eastshade is framed as an aesthetic luxury, to be savored as a fundamental part of your experience.

In other words, the game reflects Romantic attitudes about the beneficial art of walking in nature. Rebecca Solnit describes "the Romantic taste for landscape, for wild places, for simplicity, for nature as an ideal, for walking in the landscape as the consummation of a relationship with such places

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and an expression of the desire for simplicity, purity, solitude," and notes that "choosing to walk in the landscape as a contemplative, spiritual, or aesthetic experience has a specific cultural ancestry."[1] In the Western cultural context, that ancestry dates to nineteenth-century European Romanticism, predominantly in the German and British thought traditions. In one of the most famous depictions of the Romantic wanderer, Caspar David Friedrich's 1817 painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, shows an upper-class male figure gazing resolutely into a mysterious foggy valley, gazing at a pastel horizon. Friedrich's wanderer—bold, dynamic, individualistic, seeking the unknown—exemplifies the way the character functioned in the heyday of Romanticism and illustrates his mythic appeal (figure 3.1).

Our attraction to this character has, if anything, grown stronger in this era of exploratory and fantastical ludic worlds, even as we spend less time wandering around the real natural world. But if we seem to have lost our Romantic attraction to rambling through the wilds of nature, as Alenda Chang suggests, perhaps the answer can be found in our enthusiastic taste for tromping around virtual rather than physical environments.[2] As wanderers in game environments, we implicitly understand ourselves as descendants from Friedrich's wanderer, even if only subconsciously. Compare one of the title screens for 2017's *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* to Friedrich's painting (figure 3.2).[3]

The quintessential Romantic wanderer is Novalis's fictional Hyazinth from *The Apprentices of Sais*, and his quest resembles the PC's quest in *Eastshade*. The story features a world in which nature is enchantingly alive. But Hyazinth, an artistic youth, feels inexplicably melancholy, despite the love of his family and his girlfriend, Rosenblüthe. When Hyazinth meets an old man and a wise woman who tell him stories of foreign lands, "astonishingly wonderful things," and prophesy that he shall be whole only if he leaves, Hyazinth latches on to the possibility of finding his happiness by venturing out into the world.[4] After some thought, he astonishes his friends and family with the sudden decision to go, saying simply, "I must go forth into strange lands . . . maybe I'll come back, maybe I never will."[5] In his travels, he comes at last to a heavenly place, falls asleep, and dreams he's in a temple. In that temple, he lifts a shimmering veil, behind which he finds his beloved Rosenblüthe. In discovering her again, so far from home, he realizes the value in what he's always had and finally feels satisfied.

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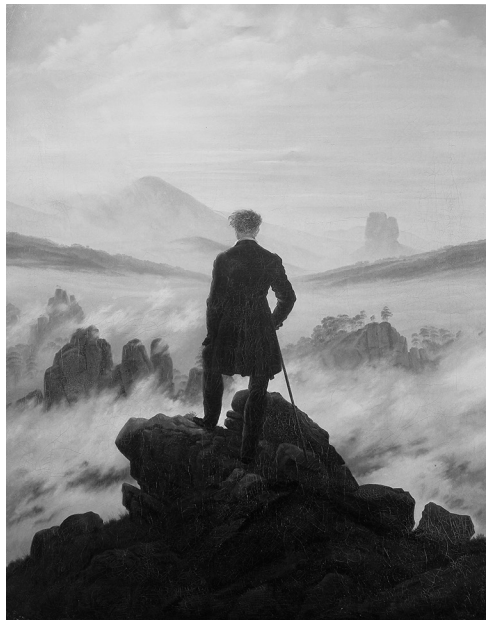

Figure 3.1
Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, 1817, by Caspar David Friedrich. Kunsthalle Hamburg. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Compare Hyazinth's story to the PC's journeying in *Eastshade*. The PC, a similarly Romantic young person with a penchant for travel, art, and the beauties of nature, ludologically cannot find the inspiration to paint without experiencing new ideas and new places (because the inspiration meter will not fill and thus the mechanic of painting will be unavailable to the player). An old woman—the PC's late mother—has told him he must travel to this astonishingly wonderful place and that only by doing so would he understand its magic. Rather than seeking something mysterious, however, the PC of *Eastshade* knows precisely what he seeks: to paint four special paintings his late mother requested. The lesson of Hyazinth—by bravely striving for the transcendent and unknown, Romantic wanderers can discover that their heart's desire was theirs all along—is transformed into a series of tasks that are very much known and matter-of-fact. One needn't stride into the mists, yearning toward the ineffable; one can simply follow directions, the completion of which (a wise elder figure promises) will yield satisfaction. Once the PC has successfully painted these views,

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Figure 3.2
The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo, 2017). Author screenshot of title screen.

they can conclude their journey at any time. They can sail away from Eastshade and, in an epilogue, sit in a wooden room, surrounded by their framed paintings and a collection of letters and memorabilia from acquaintances they met during their adventures. Already, we can begin to read the PC as a combination of Romantic wanderer and practical realist—yearning toward the indescribable but well satisfied by a nice trip and the completion of a to-do list.

Romanticism is characterized by an attraction to nature and an appreciation for the unknown, two desires that meet in the concept of the sublime. The sublime encompasses that heart-pounding, awe-inspiring exhilaration that occurs when we encounter something in nature that is both stunning and deadly—a sheer cliffside, a mountain peak, a vast ocean.[6] Only in our distance from it can we appreciate its beauty but control our fear. That combination—starkly powerful beauty, terror, and sufficient distance—creates the sense of the sublime. The landscape of Eastshade frequently inspires a sense of the sublime. We behold rivers, cliffs, oceans, mountains, the glimmering vista of Nava, the Tiffmoor Bluffs, the massive eclipse that blots out the sun over this entire planet every midday. Many of these sights could be deadly if we perceived them in person, but through the distance of the computer screen, fear and dread turn into appreciation for their beauty.

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When considering the sublime in game worlds, scholars have focused primarily on expansive landscapes and how the subsequent mastery of those landscapes through play transforms the vast sublime into something like an idyllic, preindustrial pastoral. Paul Martin, for example, argues that *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* "is encountered in the sublime mode . . . in that it emphasizes an incomprehensible largeness and expanse. This lends the game's moral framework an epic grandeur. But as the landscape becomes more familiar to the player it tends to migrate from the sublime to the picturesque mode."[7] This is how, Martin says, comfort and familiarity can render a vast, awe-inspiring landscape into an unassuming pastoral.[8] Daniel Vella counters that the surprising uncertainties of gameplay can result in the continuing presence of the sublime, even after a player's extensive experience of the world has rendered it more familiar.[9]

The traditional pastoral is characterized as a sanctuary sandwiched between the chaotic danger of wilderness and the dirty terror of industrialization, which Leo Marx calls "counterforces" to the pastoral.[10] We can recognize the pastoral element of Eastshade—a preindustrial fantasy, an arcadian idyll—but the island lacks the "counterforces" that make the pastoral what it is: defined in relation to that which tries to disrupt or destroy it. Eastshade appears unthreatened by either wilderness or industrialization. Modernity seems to have appeared in precisely (and solely) the ways that are useful and positive: the expertise to construct bicycles and zip lines, casual embrace of queer sexualities, no sexism, and some central governing body that employs park rangers to manage the country's extensive natural resources. Yet these modern or postmodern incursions on the high fantastic don't threaten or disrupt this culture's values; rather, they serve to render the fantasy even more delightful to players.

Because of this complication to the pastoral—because of this world's placid, imperturbable, eternally preindustrial quality—I suggest that *Eastshade* is better understood though the related concept of poetic realism rather than that of the pastoral. Despite the awesome natural beauties meant to evoke the sublime, *Eastshade* truly shines in its quieter, homier, cozier beauties: what in German aesthetic theory would be called poetic realism, or Adalbert Stifter's "law of the gentle."[11] For Stifter, historical events—natural disasters, grand vistas, great human dramas—pale in comparison with the everyday wonder of the small. This "gentle law" elevates

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small-scale occurrences to the same level of breathtaking awe as the sublime. As one critic writes, poetic realism "is concerned with the everydayness of life rather than with its exceptional moments, and the Poetic Realism of the middle of the nineteenth century, unlike the thoroughgoing naturalism fifty years later, looked upon life and found it good, and recorded with loving and minute care the details of existence."[12]

Eastshade doesn't need to be pastoralized by increased familiarity with the landscape, and it doesn't evoke terror through sudden surprise; it's a domesticated sublime from the first moment, immediately containing both awe and coziness at once. In *Eastshade*, the sublime is always in the background, unavoidable and unforgettable, and nowhere more obviously than in the huge planetary bodies that are visible in the sky at all times of the day and night but especially intrude on our notice at midday, when the daily eclipse turns the sky bright pink. Despite the constant intrusion of this epic, supernatural event, our experience of Eastshade is entirely peaceful and mostly quotidian. On the windswept and precipitous Tiffmoor Bluffs, you can light a campfire and drink some tea with a massive Earth-like planet filling the sky behind you. It's like the sublime has lost its power to evoke terror, but we can still recognize it for the terror it *would* evoke in a different context.

But while we're safe in terms of sublime terror, we still find ourselves negotiating the economic complexities of being an artistic wanderer. And the way that the wanderer evolves over the course of the nineteenth century indicates how life in *Eastshade* can go sour. At first, the wanderer is a young, wealthy man traveling for education and self-edification. In this guise, he's steeped in the Enlightenment tradition—respect for education, travel, the classics—but he's looking for something a little more, and that desire pulls him into a series of natural rambles and adventures. Shortly after, this wanderer grows into the High Romantic figure we know and love: yearning toward nature, the sublime, the ineffable, and a notion of infinity he can satisfy only by spending time in the "wilderness" (a concept that was concurrently rising in cultural estimation because of the spread of industrialization and the concurrent loss of natural habitats). As the century drifted into the increasingly revolutionary 1830s and 1840s, traveling political poets came to exemplify a wanderer as revolutionary figure: traversing the countryside to disseminate dissident texts and rabble-rouse for

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greater democratic enfranchisement and leadership. Then, after the failed revolutions of 1848 and the disappointed hopes of so many leftist intellectuals, the wanderer in the Biedermeier era came to describe the practical, precarious journeyman class of artisans left behind by industrialization, who traveled in the hope of securing work or to participate in growing labor movements.[13]

Eastshade encapsulates that trajectory of the wanderer figure as he transforms from striving Romantic hero to pragmatic migrant laborer. Andrew Cusack notes that the motif of the wanderer, for all its connection to transcendental yearning and nature-loving sublimity, "is always available as a vehicle for the theme of homelessness."[14] As the ideology of individualism increasingly took off in the industrializing nineteenth century, reinforced by the seductive promise that hard work could conquer even the most systemic hardship, individuals found themselves moving more frequently, chasing the dream of self-sufficiency. As they migrated to follow the demand for labor, workers were indeed individualized—treated as atomic units, unmoored from family and community, and considered interchangeable. As Nicole Grewling puts it, "Ultimately, a national and individual desire for and belief in political and material stabilization and, hence, a settled lifestyle (mostly promoted by the bourgeoisie) in the mid-1800s clashed with antagonistic tendencies of restless activity, mostly in economic terms."[15]

The following section considers how the ideal Romantic spirit counterposes with the realities of labor and how this tension manifests for the player who is wandering across the gameworld of *Eastshade*. In order to play the game successfully, you need to pay attention to all the different economies at play while maintaining a double consciousness about the philosophy of "doing what you love." There's quite a lot of grinding in the game, but the game's discourse occludes any dissatisfaction you might feel about having to do work you might not like. Instead, *Eastshade* promises a world that rewards the labor philosophy of late capitalism. *Eastshade* won't save you from capitalist exploitation; it doesn't need to because the very notion of exploitation has been removed. The tension between Romantic wanderer and pragmatic journeyman melts away, leaving behind inculcated job satisfaction.

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A Labor of Love

I begin by tracing out the economies—obvious and hidden—in which the player participates throughout the game. Your character is a penniless artist who travels across a fantasy land, painting beautiful landscapes and exchanging them for money known as glowstones. You paint by framing an image (adjusting borders as necessary) and clicking the mouse once, at which point a stylized screenshot appears on a canvas. In order to paint, the player needs material objects (canvas and frame), access to the location, and at least 1 unit of inspiration. The inspiration meter increases mainly when you explore new areas of the map, although there are some ways to trick inspiration out of a landscape you've already explored. If you want to keep your inspiration meter high enough to continue painting, you'll need enough glowstones to buy the tools required to explore unknown sites. You earn glowstones most often by running errands or doing favors for friendly NPCs, although you can also earn them for completing commissions (by painting a particular location at a particular time). The player thus grows resources in multiple currencies—glowstones, inspiration, inventory of objects, time and daylight, good relationships with pivotal NPCs—and slowly learns how each currency intertwines with the others. You travel and gain inspiration; in traveling, you chat with an NPC who misses the sea; you use 1 unit of inspiration to paint a seascape; you return to the NPC, who gives you glowstones in exchange for the painting; the glowstones enable you to buy a bicycle so you can travel farther and faster, and so on.

The delicate relationship of these different economies highlights how, for all the nonviolent and autotelic qualities that make it seem in some ways like a classic Walking Simulator, *Eastshade* is an RPG deeply invested in the going rates of various kinds of labor and the importance of maintaining the status quo. Whatever your initial intentions or artistic aspirations, you quickly find yourself devoting your time primarily to activities that will earn you glowstones or to the next task indicated in your notebook of active quests. The initial fantasy of roaming the landscape as an independent, itinerant artist is quickly subsumed into the practical business of completing tasks and painting on commission.

Indeed, far from embodying the Romantic wanderer who strives toward the ineffable, the player becomes an attentive errand runner almost immediately. In the conventional manner of an RPG, the game elides what counts

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as work and what counts as play as activities that seemed voluntary quickly become imperative for any player who wants to continue exploring the landscape. After orienting yourself in Lyndow, you need sixty glowstones in order to cross a bridge that separates you from the rest of the map. Not knowing how to earn money, you find yourself in a typical RPG interaction model wherein friendliness is monetized and rewarded. By conversing with the Lyndow villagers, you can get a few commissions for paintings, or find a man who will buy the feathers you collect, or accomplish similar small chores. In so doing, you'll also talk with a troubled father, try (and fail) to console a desolate ship captain, and collect a dozen plants that don't yet have a use for you. Running errands and doing unpaid favors allows you to happen upon the few actions that will earn you the money you need to cross the bridge. At the following chokepoint, you'll need three letters of recommendation from villagers with whom you've developed a relationship by doing unpaid labor. You don't ever negotiate a price for your services beforehand; you simply do the work and hope that it'll be rewarded in some capacity. By expecting the player to do that work by default, uncomplainingly, the game obscures the fact that friendliness has real economic value here. In the context of late capitalism, this character participates in the gig economy because they lack the bargaining power to negotiate a fair wage for their work.

But *Eastshade* can paper over any ugly ramifications of laborer/employer dynamics because in this precapitalist dreamscape, your labor is appropriately rewarded and valued. The world of Eastshade is a cozy, beautiful fantasy, and nowhere more than in its erasure of poverty. If you find yourself outside too late at night and you start to get cold, the game transports you automatically to your previous bedroom. You don't need to eat at all, and other costs are kept to a minimum. In this fantastical countryside, the anthropomorphic animal residents spend most of their time in upper-class-coded leisure pursuits—reading, playing instruments, and pondering scientific questions. Some of them practice a traditional craft or trade (making pots, innkeeping, metalworking), and some have anachronistically modern occupations. When you're tasked with testing a tincture for illegal substances and take it to the university scientist Zahra, she meets you with her typical greeting: "A fine day for science!" followed by the incredulous question, "You want me to check for trace elements of endangered plants?" There's a bewildering moment where you might hear the outlandishness

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of the request in its real context—Who barges into a scientist's lab and demands they drop everything and run a complicated experiment just for you?—but of course Zahra's love for her work conquers all. "I enjoy running tests!" she replies enthusiastically. "Just give me the potion and a few minutes." Class distinctions don't exist in *Eastshade*, and everyone seems to have chosen the worthwhile occupation that suits them best.

In other words, *Eastshade* offers a world in which everyone can "do what you love," the phrase that Miya Tokumitsu calls the "unofficial work mantra of our time."[16] She argues that treating work as a labor of love, combined with late capitalist trends like online microlabor and a gamified gig economy, has resulted in a romanticization of work that benefits employers far more than employees. Inspirational messaging such as, "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life" or "Do what you love, love what you do," obscures the economic realities that necessitate undertaking work that you *don't* love, and can even make doing so seem shameful. As Tokumitsu explains, "The problem is that [the 'do what you love' mantra] leads not to salvation, but to the devaluation of actual work, including the very work it pretends to elevate—and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers."[17] Brooke Erin Duffy terms those caught in this cycle "aspirational labourers," who "pursue productive activities that hold the promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven. Indeed, while a select few may realize their professional goals—to get paid doing what they love—this worker ideology obscures problematic constructions of gender and class subjectivities."[18] Duffy argues that aspirational labor is rarely financially worthwhile, despite its implicit promises to "a growing number of these amateur Creatives [who] believe their reserves of time, energy and capital will pay off as they 'get discovered.'"[19] But while such aspirational labor might not be successful in terms of earning money for those who do it, she darkly concludes, the rhetoric around it *has* succeeded at "romanticiz[ing] work in a moment when its conditions and affordances are ever more precarious, unstable, flexible—and *un*romantic."[20] In *Eastshade*, the dangers of precarity under late capitalism are similarly erased—not just by a romantic notion of work but by a world in which such a romanticization truly isn't exploitative at all.

In another sense, we could say that *Eastshade* positively reclaims many of the same philosophies and ideologies that have been rightly recognized

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as toxic, racist, or discriminatory in contemporary discourse. I don't mean that such philosophies are also problematic in *Eastshade* and the game ignores their toxicity; rather, these philosophies do not, for the most part, reflect anything rotten within this fantasy world. Consider, for example, Efe's explanation at the bridge into Nava the first time the player tries to cross into the city. Efe requests your reference letters and, when asked why letters are required, replies by confirming a nativist, anti-immigrant policy that's apparently new in Nava: "It hasn't always been this way, but lately we've been getting more newcomers than usual. We don't want to be unwelcoming to new folk, but we are trying to have some measure of security." While this can set the player slightly on their heel (requiring a backtrack to Lyndow or the intervening forest), the friendly NPCs with their harmless errands make the gating mechanic feel like a nudge to explore your world a bit more, not a nativist exclusion tactic. The game reflects twenty-first-century ideologies and prejudices—like an exclusionary immigration policy—but depicts them as part of a world where those ideologies *make sense to have and do no harm*. They aren't underhanded, racist, or backstabbing, and they result in a gorgeous experience where everything's beautiful and nothing hurts.

What complicates this reading is the treatment of the indigenous people of Eastshade, who seem to fall into two groups: the first folk, who live underground but occasionally emerge at night for drumming circles, and the indigenous people, whose ancestors created the ruins on Tiffmoor Bluffs. The first folk offer no ideological difficulty; they, like the others in Eastshade, seem to be living their best lives, enjoying their drums, and remaining generally happy with the status quo. You engage more fundamentally with the colonialist power structures of Eastshade, however, in the depiction of the indigenous people in the "Thief of Sinkwood Inn" storyline. On an isolated island in the midst of a storm, you investigate a small theft in an Agatha Christie–like mystery. Someone has taken a book from a historian, so you rifle through everyone's belongings and interrogate them on their whereabouts and motivations. The denouement reveals the reason for these heightened stakes: a long-running battle among university anthropologists, business developers, and an indigenous woman trying to protect her land from both interests. The player discovers that a native woman, Helena, has taken the historian's book to try to translate ruins she's seen on her ancestral land. As a result of the investigation, Helena is

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not only shamed but utterly defeated as the objects of importance discovered during the investigation trigger the takeover of the ancient land by the university for further study. Helena wanted desperately to avoid this outcome—"I can't afford for the ruins to go to science—Science doesn't pay!"—but as the belated investigator summarizes when she finally arrives, "Unfortunately for her, we've now got solid evidence that the ruins are filled with ancient relics. No chance of selling the property now. Ownership will most likely default to University."

In questioning each character, the player can develop a fuller picture of the range of opinions in Eastshade regarding its indigenous inhabitants. The historian Omiros calls the ruins "an incredibly rich source of heritage and culture for the people of Eastshade. I believe that within the ruins there are relics that would help us understand our beginnings on this island," suggesting that all current Eastshaders might descend from the indigenous population. But other evidence in the inn, including an article in the *Shadian Post*, separates out some group of Eastshaders as indigenous and others as not. Innkeeper Kevork explains to you that "indigenous people think no one should even look at [the ruins]. Most everyone else just wants to see what's inside!" Reiley the musician says sympathetically, "It's such a bad situation. The indigenous people just want the land to stay sacred. All they ask is that no one goes in the ruins. But the university is constantly sending people over to investigate. They want to 'extract the artifacts.' "

The game gives no clear response to the colonizer mentality on display in the Sinkwood Inn storyline, but its subtleties are most clearly elucidated in the way different characters treat theft—which is to say, what the game treats as unproblematically free for the taking (or free with a bit of a wink) and what counts as private property for which the taker will be prosecuted. Vadim the businessman possesses a relic from Tiffmoor Ruins in his briefcase, but this "theft" is not treated with equivalent investigative rigor as the missing book. When you find similar relics in Nikol's suitcase (which you demand to search despite her discomfort), she says defensively, "I didn't steal them. They belong to my ancestors!" It feels pretty hypocritical for the player character to be questioning potential thieves when the player has been harvesting every plant and scooping up every candle, board, and canvas in the country without any respect for property rights. It's not as if your theft is somehow less criminal or even unacknowledged; Bojan, when he gives you the schematic for a raft, shamefacedly admits he sometimes

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also steals candles in order to get the required wax. But *this* theft of a book (in which the player absolutely would have participated if they'd only had the opportunity) motivates an open police investigation and a total lockdown of the crime scene. Why is Helena's theft of the book a crime, but the player's theft of every plant in the inn's garden unremarkable? Why can the other inhabitants of Eastshade, including the player, roam the countryside and take what they find, almost entirely without repercussion? It seems as if everyone in Eastshade can do what they love except some of those coded as disenfranchised, who are criminalized and erased as quickly as possible.

This seems like an exception to my previous argument. If *Eastshade* succeeds as a safe space for particularly US American millennial anxieties about precarity—if it offers an idyllic place where the problematic ideologies of our culture are tamed and made just—how do we square that with the colonialist double standard we find here? It's uncomfortable; Helena has been mistreated, and we have participated in that mistreatment (and gotten paid for doing so). Why offer the storyline at all? I think the explanation here is twofold. First, the game seems to be trying to engage honestly with an ugly issue and illustrate its ugliness through the unfairness of Helena's fate; in so doing, it's out of joint with the game's overall tone (which is one of ideological comfort rather than conscience prodding), but its heart is in the right place. The second reading, more insidious, is that the Sinkwood Inn storyline illustrates the limitations of trying to present all these ideologies as good at once. When a commitment to anticolonialism comes into conflict with a romanticization of the gig economy and the PC's love of labor, the latter wins.

Throughout, *Eastshade* comes across as openly subversive in its rejection of violence but neoliberal in its economics. You cannot buy a sword in Eastshade because, the blacksmith tells you, they would much prefer to make tea kettles and zip-line mechanisms. But even in this subversion of traditional ludic norms, the predominant philosophy ("do what you love!") shines through: you cannot buy a sword because the blacksmith only does work they love, not because violence is inherently bad. In its adherence to the ideals of late capitalism—the veneration of productivity for its own sake, the notion that loving your work will conquer all economic difficulty, the unquestioning respect for problematic ideologies that (mostly) don't seem problematic here—*Eastshade* provides a perfect escape for its late capitalist audience, seamlessly merging our longing for a world in which our

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work had meaning with our desire for a world where everything didn't seem so broken, so in need of fixing and critique and awareness.

The following section broadens to consider *Eastshade* as a work of art developed during a particular time and with a particular set of cultural expectations placed on the artist. Indie game development has embraced the mantra of "doing what you love" perhaps more than any other industry, for reasons we consider in these final pages of the chapter. Players of an indie game who are disproportionately powerful compared with fans of other art forms demand a unique performance of precarity from developers. Eastshade Studios does a masterful job at this performance and offers a fascinating perspective on *Eastshade* as a kind of wish fulfillment for the independent game industry.

Playing with Precarity

In Nava, when you enter the inn below the Tarnished Teapot, the manager, Emil, tries to discourage you from taking a room, explaining apathetically that the inn is damp, odorous, and poorly maintained (by the manager himself). When pressed about his surprising success considering that attitude, Emil tells you he's still in business because Nava happens to be a boomtown with plenty of visitors who need a place to stay. His lesson: "Act impulsively and sometimes you get rich! That's what I've learned, anyway. Oh, and . . . have an inheritance." It's a tongue-in-cheek joke, but also one that prompts us to understand *Eastshade* as an economic system related to the economic system in which it was developed—the late capitalist United States between 2013 and 2019. Doing so can help us better articulate "the relationships between the economic systems of software, in-game diegetic accumulation and exchange, through to the actual worlds of everyday play and global consumption."[21]

Eastshade was developed over five years and eventually self-published by Eastshade Studios in 2019. As they tell it, "Eastshade Studios was founded in December 2013 when Danny quit his day job as a 3D environment artist in triple-A games to build a weird world (Eastshade). With collaborators sprinkled around the globe, we are committed to building worlds that feel like real places, explored through non-violent mechanics."[22] Note the way that the studio introduces its core ideology within two brief sentences. It presents itself as a hopeful, anticapitalist, follow-your-dreams sort of company

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("quit his day job . . . to build a weird world"), bolstered by the imprimatur of a traditional capitalist authority (he was a successful "3D environment artist in triple-A games"). The description communicates expertise, authenticity, and humility, carefully balanced.

An early press video further emphasizes how the studio endeavors to present itself. In the short video (the only one posted in the Eastshade Studios press kit), a day passes in the life of developer Danny Weinbaum in early January 2015, a year after he quit his day job.[23] We first see him writing code at a nice wooden desk in a room that reads as solidly middle-class US American, working on the AI system that schedules the NPCs to complete their loops. Outside Weinbaum's window, day turns into night. At 0:48, we see Weinbaum take a break to cook a packet of instant ramen for 10 full seconds (in a video that's only about 100 seconds long; see figure 3.3). Weinbaum then returns to his desk, and as the shadows lengthen, the camera focuses on the disappearing noodles as Weinbaum's hands type (figure 3.4). Posted four years before *Eastshade* would eventually be released in February 2019, this time lapse offers a masterful performance of precarity, patience, dedication, and Weinbaum's willingness to suffer for his art.

In interviews after the game's release, the same story prevails. Weinbaum saved up money and planned to spend two years developing his dream game, but, relatably and humbly, he laughs at this underestimation: "I felt like if I just had two years, I could make and finish something. Of course, that was totally wrong. It turned out to be five years, and I couldn't even come close to doing it alone. I ended up hiring other folks to help me out."[24] Again, he threads the needle between presenting himself as the visionary artist he is—he gave this interview after *Eastshade* had been published and critically acclaimed—and humble laborer. The message is that he sacrificed to create this piece of art, and it's worth it. His work and his life merge seamlessly in anecdotes like the one later in the same interview, when he mentions that he and his girlfriend lived at his grandmother's house during the last year of development in order to save more money for localizations.

Indie game developers have been framing themselves in a similar way since *Braid*'s Jonathan Blow—self-identifying with his piece, working in isolation with a single-minded obsession for years, sacrificing other parts of his life for the good of his work.[25] But Weinbaum's self-presentation differs subtly from that of earlier game developers (and earlier stories about game developers). During the indie boom between 2008 and 2012, audiences were thrilled by heroic stories of indies that made it big on a shoestring

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Figure 3.3

Figure 3.4
"Eastshade Game Development Time Lapse" (2015). Author screenshots of Eastshade Studios.

budget. By 2019, that story had become increasingly precarious, necessitating a self-presentation more humble, more compromising, more self-effacing, and more responsive to the player base.

In this paradigm, successful independent game development consists of a complicated cocktail of work, luck, and affect: extended precarity, enough privilege to survive precarity, and the promise of overcoming it through

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hard work, patience, and (crucially) the subjugation of both personal needs and artistic vision in deference to player/consumers. If we combine this with Giddings and other economic theorists of gaming, it makes sense that this paradigm would suffuse the fictional words these developers create. Successful indie game developers are definitionally a population of artists who have turned themselves into business professionals. For Eastshade Studios, as for the PC wandering artist within the fantasy world of *Eastshade*, it is (to apply Mark Fisher) "simply obvious that everything . . . should be run as a business."[26] The world of *Eastshade*, like the world of indie game development, is designed to seem like the ideal situation for inspired and inspiring artists, but its self-presentation is at odds with the business-based reality of both experiences.

As Ergin Bulut identifies, love itself has been industrialized by the intersection of precarity and passion in the post-Fordist, late capitalist game industry.[27] While "capitalism has always produced inequalities, the field of video game production presents a distinct form of inequality, since the affect of love and social glamor make it a highly desirable job where work *looks* and *feels* more like play."[28] For independent game developers, or anyone with the privilege of working in a creative industry in 2010s, the "do what you love" philosophy functions as a velvet fist, offering the semblance of free choice but backed by the constant threat of insecurity. Work under this paradigm becomes what Bulut calls "an authoritarian labor regime that commands us how to approach work: love it. Anything other than love toward work becomes unacceptable."[29] Under such a regime, the older evils of inequality continue, distributing themselves unequally across this new landscape of playbour and mandatory enjoyment, especially since calling one's work a labor of love "negates the possibilities for individual and social critique. Liberal conceptions of work in the creative industries frame employment as a matter of pleasure and choice,"[30] a particularly dangerous move when "only *some* bodies seem to be able to practice a labor of love and take risks."[31] The discourse of work as love serves to calcify existing inequalities, with the added bonus of soul-negating self-indoctrination that squelches a worker's suspicion that perhaps they are being mistreated by an employer (or, in the case of independent game development, a fandom of consumers). And without job security, the playful qualities of creative work disappear into economic anxiety and insecurity, aided by the worker's sense of guilt and shame that they may not truly love their work enough if they ever take a break.[32]

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This internalized pressure to love and self-identify with one's labor was originally identified by feminist theorists of the 1970s, Bulut notes.[33] As Kathi Weeks argues in an article analyzing the similarities between 1970s feminist and twenty-first-century self-help career philosophies, contemporary laborers in creative industries design their sense of self around their love of their work in the same ways that earlier generations of housewives found their labor imbricated with their love for their families. It's something Weeks calls "a new career mystique, a version that extols the emotional commitment and entrepreneurial zeal of the ideal post-Fordist wage worker . . . banking on another familiar feminine mystique, one that celebrates the happy raptures of romantic love as the essence of feminine fulfillment."[34] Having been convinced that the achievement of enduring love is paramount to happiness (with husband or career, respectively), the ideologically indoctrinated laborer (in Simone de Beauvoir's iconic phrasing) "chooses to want her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her to be the expression of her freedom."[35] Weeks asks,

> Who would not want to achieve more love and happiness in their life at work, particularly when they have no choice but to work for wages? Cultivating a deep love for work comparable to the stereotypical feminine attachment to romantic love may be an ambitious undertaking, but it is also only one in a long line of capitalist structure-subject-infrastructure-adjustment programs throughout its history. In this case, too, the goal is purportedly to help individuals express their freedom while also creating, as Tokumitsu explains the disciplinary functions of the "do what you love" evangelism, "a labor force that embraces its own exploitation."[36]

In *Eastshade*, the PC romanticizes their wandering and loves their work, which merges seamlessly with the rest of their emotional life. The PC's mother fondly remembered four vistas, and the player must complete paintings in those four places to win the game, but the process and experience of completing paintings for anonymous commissioners are identical to completing the paintings in remembrance of a beloved parent. Work is love; work is life. While *Eastshade* presents itself as fundamentally subversive and critical of conventional gameplay—which it is, in terms of its nonviolent mechanics—it remains within a loving relationship with late capitalism: completely dependent on it and uncritical of the parts of it that make its players feel more comfortable. As a fairy tale of late capitalist precarity, *Eastshade* works beautifully.

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4 Walking in Circles: Bodily Constraints in *Ritual of the Moon*

In *Ritual of the Moon*, the PC has been banished from the entire Earth and constrained to move within a tiny space. She walks and rewalks this space daily. She also conducts an identical ritual each day—ordering mystical objects, connecting stars into a constellation, and deciding whether to protect Earth from an apocalyptic comet. Every day the player must remember to play, but only for five minutes at a time (the length of a single day in-game). When such constraints are placed around movement—when one is denied the chance to exert agency over space, to wander freely—what is left?

This chapter considers *Ritual of the Moon* as a queer, feminist take on wandering under constraints—constraints on space, on time, and on bodies. In each case, I'm interested in how a wanderer's intersectional identity affects the way they are situated (and situate themselves) within spatial, temporal, and bodily systems. Mythologically, witches tend to be outsiders (by choice or by force), living on the margins of societies and feared for their magical powers. Historically, that fear inspired horrific crimes against (mostly) women whose power challenged the establishment. The witch of *Ritual* commands massive astrophysical power and suffers mightily at the hands of the societally powerful, who have placed punishing constraints on her space, time, and body. How does she try to evade them?

I draw from Sarah Jane Cervenak's *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom* to construct wandering as a metaphorical concept, not a physical one, the practice of which emancipates those to whom society gives no spatial outlet. Internal wandering, Cervenak argues, rebels against an external order dedicated to the immobilization of Black and female bodies. Following Denise Ferreira da Silva and Gayatri Spivak,

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Cervenak points out how wandering took on its Enlightenment-informed connotation of freedom only by defining itself in relation to the unfreedom of others, freeing itself only through the subjugation of others into nonwandering immobility. I explicate *Ritual of the Moon* through this lens, showing how theorists in feminist game studies, queer game studies, disability studies, and Black and White feminisms help us to conceptualize repetitive steps, in circles, as a powerful and alternative mode of wandering.

Women in Space

Each day of *Ritual* begins with the PC facing the vast emptiness of space. An Earth-like planet, gently swirled with clouds, occupies the far left of the screen. As designer and writer Kara Stone summarizes, the game tells "a story about a witch who has been exiled to the moon, left there to die by the people on earth who fear her power. When comets start hitting the earth, she realizes she has the ability to protect the earth—or let it burn."[1] Her space is small. She can walk approximately two body lengths to her left and approximately one body length to her right before she triggers the doorway to a capsule (presumably the same spaceship in which she's traveled here).[2] Once inside, she can move about three body lengths to the right, where there's a window, a stool, and a dashboard with buttons the player cannot press. The left side of the capsule features the space in which she completes her ritual, which contains several ritual objects. Clicking on these objects triggers a black screen, in which the witch inhabits a different spatiality from the rest of the scene. She touches the objects in a specific order, then connects a glowing field of stars into a single line, forming a constellation. The words of her daily mantra appear (different each day), and the music swells. Then suddenly, a glowing penumbra grows from the right side of the screen. Clicking on that light will return you from this alternate, ritual space to the regular, capsule space. The comet enters from the right. The player can then walk back outside to make their daily decision—avert the comet and offer protection, or let the comet crash. Afterward, the game shows a circular record of the previous days' decisions. In sum, the PC inhabits a playing space of approximately seven body lengths.

In comparison with the vast landscapes of adventurous possibility proffered to the (mostly) male protagonists of video games, this woman's tiny arena of life provides a stark contrast, as well as a reminder of the

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millennia-long history of constraint placed on women's wandering bodies. Rebecca Solnit points out that whereas a wandering man is seen as bold and audacious, the same activities in a woman have more often been taken as evidence of sexual promiscuity. We can see this distinction in language: "A woman who has violated sexual convention can be said to be strolling, roaming, wandering, straying—all terms that imply that women's travel is inevitably sexual or that their sexuality is transgressive when it travels."[3] Suggestive connotations surround the wandering woman and encourage her to stay home, such that "travel . . . has remained a largely masculine prerogative . . . with women often the destination, the prize, or keepers of the hearth."[4] These gendered roles have remained one of the most fundamental tropes in video games as well, ever since Mario traveled across world after world only to learn at the end of each level that the evil Bowser had secured Princess Peach in yet another castle. Solnit calls the regulation of public space that keeps women at home "a sort of masonry veil,"[5] which—whether through unexamined custom, street harassment, or justifications of sexual violence—ensures "that women will not feel at ease, that we will remember our role as sexual beings, available to, accessible to men. It is a reminder that we are not to consider ourselves equals, participating in public life with our own right to go where we like when we like, to pursue our own projects with a sense of security."[6]

This lack of public access results not only in the tendency of female-coded artistic practices to be smaller-scoped and circumscribed, but as a broader justification for misogyny in its most basic form: the general exclusion of women. The threat of rape, and its many ex post facto justifications, has historically worked to exclude women from much of the human experience of living and traveling in the world—excluding them, among other things, from the experience of wandering. Solnit quotes a realization from a nineteen-year-old Sylvia Plath, who wrote in her journal, "My consuming desire to mingle . . . to be part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always in danger of assault and battery. . . . I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night."[7] In the famous essay "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf argues that limitations on women's travels and time spent in public substantially hamper the creation of women's art and the richness of female life. Woolf opens the piece by describing a moment at Oxbridge when she deviated from a gravel path onto the grass and was

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intercepted by a beadle whose "face expressed horror and indignation . . . he was a Beadle; I was a woman. This was the turf; there was the path. Only the Fellows and Scholars are allowed here; the gravel is the place for me."[8]

Kate Manne begins *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* by quoting this moment, analyzing it from the perspective of the beadle, who "may have little insight into the causal triggers for his hostility . . . he is still rankled by the sight of one straying from the path. He reaches for spurious grounds, or seizes on near universal missteps, to justify his resentment toward her."[9] Misogyny, Manne argues, is not about individual men "who are prone to feel hatred, hostility, or other similar emotions toward any and every woman, or at least women generally, *simply because they are women*"; rather, misogyny "ought to be understood as the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance."[10] That first definition, which Manne calls "the naïve conception," would serve to define misogyny out of existence in a truly patriarchal society in which all women stayed within their circumscribed space (both literally and metaphorically).[11] In such a perfectly patriarchal society, hating women would be irrational and even "highly *peculiar*, as a matter of basic moral psychology": "When it comes to the women who are not only dutifully but lovingly catering to his desires, what's to hate, exactly?"[12] This definition, then, is completely inadequate in defining contemporary misogyny, which is not about the (rare, pathological) hatred toward obedient women but rather about *space*—who controls it, who assumes they are entitled to control it, who feels affronted when others assume the space is also theirs, and who (in extreme cases) commits violence to ensure their continuing control. If video games partly function as a practice ground for physical fantasies, then Walking Simulators could be read as the ultimate female fantasy of walking unencumbered in a world where no one will attack them or refuse them access.

But faced with millennia of this, female walkers have often responded by turning inward. In *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*, Sarah Jane Cervenak theorizes that internal wandering serves as a response and alternative to oppression and external constraint, exposing the transgressive nature of internal wandering within a racially and sexually repressive cultural context.[13] For Cervenak, wandering is primarily a metaphorical concept, not a physical once, and its practice emancipates those to whom society gives no other outlet. She writes that

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"wandering—daydreaming, mental and rhetorical ramblings—offers new pathways for the enactment of Black female philosophical desire."[14] Internal wandering rebels against an external order dedicated to the immobilization of Black bodies (male and female) and female bodies more generally. Cervenak, following Denise Ferreira da Silva and Gayatri Spivak, points to the ways that wandering took on its Enlightenment-informed connotation of freedom only by defining itself in relation to the unfreedom of others. In Cervenak's words, "The Enlightenment's supposedly straight text or choreographic script—where *straight* refers to the putatively disinterested investments in reason, morality, and justice—was frequently written through wandering: sidesteps into Otherness that forged the Enlightenment's racialized, gendered, and sexualized energetic conditions of possibility."[15]

Not only did the so-called rational wandering of Immanuel Kant's "Philosopher's Path" demand "sidesteps into Otherness" against which to define itself, "the endless roaming of the purportedly enlightened emissaries of imperialism, and with it a promiscuous and increasingly narrow understanding of the human, required the energetic hijacking of someone else's will."[16] Kant and his philosophical rambles could not have happened, physically or metaphysically, outside of their eighteenth-century colonizer context. The European post-Enlightenment wanderer, by benefiting from the material luxuries of physically violent imperialism, freed himself to wander metaphysically by creating philosophical structures to subjugate others into nonwandering immobility.

Cervenak makes the important point that wandering continues to be a privilege, inaccessible to all and often still defined against an Other who is not accorded that freedom. She writes that "even while the idealized post-Enlightenment subject can move errantly—along the crooked grooves of false things—in the interest of its definition, the bodies figured as the disposable ground of such wandering endure immobilization and trespass."[17] The inequitable access to physical pathways (and certain bodies' vulnerability to retroactive narrativizing) makes the kind of interior wanderings Cervenak highlights all the more imperative. Although for certain bodies, "physical wandering is often subject to external policing and arrest . . . there are other modalities of wandering and unrestrained rumination possible even if the state decides you don't get to walk freely."[18]

To consider the extent to which the identity and physical characteristics of the wanderer shape the way movement is perceived, let's momentarily

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consider a text in which a White, cis, male, Enlightenment-era body is placed under spatial constraint. In 1790, twenty-seven-year-old army officer Xavier de Maistre was confined to forty-two days of house arrest in Turin after a duel. During his confinement, de Maistre wrote and later published "A Journey Round My Room," a humorous travelogue inspired by contemporary accounts of the "Grand Tour" and Laurence Sterne's digressive descriptions of travel in *Tristram Shandy* three decades earlier.[19] De Maistre raves about the benefits of "the new mode of travelling I introduce into the world,"[20] before describing in full detail the way he perambulates his room during his 'journey' ("I shall traverse my room up and down and across, without rule or plan. I shall even zig-zag about, following, if needs be, every possible geometrical line. . . . I seldom keep to a straight line. From my table I go towards a picture which is placed in a corner; thence I set out in an oblique direction for the door").[21]

Beyond critiquing the long-winded travel narratives of the time, De Maistre's tongue-in-cheek journal of his travels presents the reader with a clear example of class, race, and gender privilege when it comes to wandering. De Maistre's days are filled with contemplating artworks and books as his servant, Joanetti, runs his errands out of doors. The total comfort that accompanies his imprisonment differentiates him from any of the narratives Cervenak considers in her book. At no point does he seem concerned about money, and at no point is his future freedom in doubt (and to his credit, he does acknowledge this luxury and compares his happy situation to that of people suffering homelessness elsewhere in the city). The text reads as precisely what it is: the errant thoughts of a young, cheerful man placed under a temporary constraint. Its stakes bear no resemblance to those of someone enslaved, imprisoned for a lifetime, or under threat of serious violence. When his sentence ends, he writes defiantly, and with the ring of revolutionaries everywhere, that this short imprisonment held no real power over his mental ramblings anyway.[22] This is, to put it mildly, easy for him to say, as it lasted barely long enough for him to write this playful travelogue. But even after such a brief and bounded loss of freedom, de Maistre comes to a similar conclusion to those who face substantial trauma and oppression—that internal, mental wandering can stand in for outdoor exploration in times of physical constraint.

To include another context—another way in which internal wandering serves as a response to constraints of physical space—compare the witch of

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Ritual with the ascetic Christian tradition her lifestyle mimics. In medieval Europe, religious extremists known as anchorites "sought to withdraw so radically from the world that they had themselves sealed into cells for life."[23] Ann Warren finds records of 414 women, 201 men, and 165 persons of indeterminate gender who, in the years between 1100 and 1539, decided to be entombed and live (sometimes for decades) within one small room.[24] The enclosure ceremony included last rites. Through a lengthy schedule of daily prayers, the anchorite crafted a rich internal landscape to supplement for the external one their devotions made unavailable. The *Ancrene Wisse*, a guide written for anchorites, writes of "the inner rule of the heart, which is the far more important goal of the anchoritic life. In fact, the outer rule should be a mere servant to the lady of the inner rule."[25]

We can clearly see such a turn inward in *Ritual of the Moon*. Constrained to a minuscule physical space in which to move, the witch creates an alternative, spiritual space in practicing her daily ritual. She constructs it through three actions, each of which deepens her focus and reestablishes the alternate space she builds through her practice. First, she touches small objects in an order that the player tries to remember from day to day. These objects seem to exist in her capsule as well as in her spiritual space, thus serving as transitional objects. Second, the screen blackens further to a constellation of stars, which she then connects. Third, a written mantra appears and the music swells. When the comet begins to glow from the right and the music changes, it reads as an intrusion of real-world space on the internal space the witch painstakingly crafts with her daily ritual.

In creating this internal space through ritual, the witch (and the player) provide one answer to the question Stone asks in their writing on the game: When confronted by this level of oppression, how "could she possibly heal from all this?" Stone writes that "*Ritual of the Moon* takes place in the mundane" and "suspect[s] that if healing through and with videogame technology is at all possible, it exists at this level."[26] Spatially, the witch's movement is repetitive, ritualistic; she walks inside, she walks outside, repeated ad infinitum. She wanders by crafting an internal, spiritual space while physically she walks in circles. But *Ritual of the Moon* is also durational; it is designed to be experienced once every day in a ritualized performance that could perhaps offer the player something like healing. The next section turns from constraints in space to constraints in time—looking more carefully at

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the many kinds of temporality at play (and under limitation) in *Ritual of the Moon*.

Temporalities under Constraint

One of the more arresting qualities of *Ritual* is the way in which it anticipates and subverts the conventions surrounding time in video games. As Stone notes, "Videogames are a time-based medium. The playtimes of videogames are precisely calculated: 60 hours, 240 hours, 1 hour, 15 minutes a day over 3 years. The production time is measured as well, though often with less precision."[27] Players expect that time and timing will matter greatly when they try out a new game. Many of the most beloved video game genres are predicated on the player developing the skills to protect a character from danger by executing split-second manipulations at a precisely correct moment. And many genres now assume that it will take months (if not years) for a player to get good enough to play successfully—expecting, in short, that players will devote significant amounts of time to a game's completion. *Ritual* both demands a high level of time commitment (a month of attentive play) and subverts it (only 5 minutes of attention per day), creating a complicated commentary on temporality.

The game's notion of temporality is deepened by the several theorizations of time that it brings into conversation with one another. Multiple oppressions intersect in *Ritual of the Moon*, both diegetically and extradiegetically. The PC is a non-White, queer woman who has been exiled from her home and effectively imprisoned in a barely habitable location. In addition to the PC's complex identity, the developers' own identities overlap in some ways with the PC's (and in other ways do not). Stone has written about how mental illness and disability affected and inflected the process of the game's creation.[28] The challenges the design team faced lengthened the game's development and partly inspired the mix of temporalities at play in the game. *Ritual* thus becomes an increasingly complex meditation when seen as a game about multiple temporalities and existing at the node of multiple identity positionalities—a game in which female time, queer time, and "crip time" intersect. This section outlines those intersecting temporalities, drawing primarily from Shira Chess's discussion of women and time in *Ready Player Two*, Bonnie Ruberg's application of queer time to the pace of video games in *Video Games Have Always Been*

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Queer, Audre Lorde's writings on womanism and disability, and discussions of "crip time" in conjunction with Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory."

For Chess in *Ready Player Two*, constraints on women's time and space have resulted in the creation of certain modes of play and the construction of a female "Player Two" identity to match. Chess both critiques and assumes this identity, writing, "I play with the keen understanding that I am part of an idealized audience constructed by the video game industry." Players' feelings about productivity, leisure, and guilt are exacerbated and manipulated by the style of play assumed of female players.[29] Though the development of games for (and the marketing toward) "Player Two" presents itself as empowering and feminist—a way for girls and women to enjoy and excel in video games—Chess finds it unconvincing and patronizing: "The system suggests a condescending solution to the complex problem of leisure and diversification. It manages the potential of gender diversity by reaffirming common stereotypes about how women and girls are expected to play."[30] These are not necessarily the ways that women *want* to play, Chess argues, but the identity construction is insidiously circular; because Player Two is expected to play a certain way, the game industry designs that type of game for her, so society writ large thinks that's how she *should* want to play, so over time she *just happens to want to play that way*, ad infinitum.

In part because female wandering and wanderers have suffered under misogynistic constraints in the domain of space—where worlds exist, both physical and digital, in which feminized bodies have been sexualized or excluded or both—female gaming has become increasingly associated with time rather than space. Chess argues provocatively that "issues of women and play have been inextricably linked to issues of time: what a woman considers play or leisure is not necessarily defined only by the activities she enjoys, but by the activities that fit neatly and cheaply into her fragmented schedule."[31] The game industry designs quick, casual games for women players because they are assumed to have only small bits of time to devote to leisure. As she writes, "Video games designed for and marketed to women tended to treat all women players as though they were mothers. . . . As presumed mothers their play was meant to be necessarily productive, filling holes of time or functioning as a backdrop to emotional labor."[32] Durational games, mobile games, and casual games that demand only a few minutes at a time to play are marketed to a stereotypical supermom who

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can afford only a brief break from the all-encompassing demands of work and family.

"Time positive" is therefore one of the ten characteristics that Chess charts to identify "whether a game has been designed for perceived woman audiences."[33] A score of 5 or below on her chart suggests it was not designed for Player Two, while a score of 6 or above indicates that it was. Evaluating *Ritual of the Moon* by these ten characteristics, however, yields the interesting score of 5: thematic congruence, low risk, nonsexualized characters, low harassment potential, and low violence. Of these five attributes, "nonviolent" and "low risk" are true only in a certain light. While avoiding the gory graphics of typical video game violence, the violence of *Ritual* exists on a planetary and omnicidal scale. The smoking, gaping scars visible from each comet's contact with the planet suggest that a single contact (much less twenty-eight in a row) would be an extinction event for humanity and many other species. In one of the game's endings, the Earth completely explodes and disappears. Considering this planetary destruction as violence also puts the "low-risk" categorization into question. Chess defines "low-risk games" as those in which a loss "doesn't have negative ramifications in game play—it just prevents them from moving forward to the next level."[34] While the player can technically move on to the next day (that is, the next level) after a missed day, the game doesn't clearly script the comet hitting the Earth as failure or loss, but rather a choice the player might or might not make. Moreover, the hit certainly has lasting ramifications for the entirety of the game (that is, in determining the endings the player can reach and the texts they are shown). Should you miss a day, one comet will crash into the Earth. But only that catastrophic day will pass, even if you return to the game months later. One cannot play day 1, wait twenty-seven days, and then return to see the Earth annihilated; one must actively take part in its annihilation. Finally, the element one might most expect to describe *Ritual* ("time positive"), also does not really fit under Chess's definition.[35] Though each session is only five minutes long, suggesting affinity with casual gaming, the player actually must remember to play *Ritual* for twenty-eight days in a row—a much larger than usual commitment than most casual (or many noncasual) games in terms of attention and attachment.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that *Ritual of the Moon* is not a game that has been designed precisely for Chess's female-identified player. While the game explores a complex of themes relevant to female experience,

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it is not exactly designed for Player Two, but it is also not exactly uninterested in (or unaware of) Player Two's expectations. Intersectionality is a crucial reason for this muddied explanation; as all identities are intersectional, including that of the witch, understanding her solely as "female" limits the complexity of her personhood and the possibilities gleaned by seeing her through multiple lenses.[36] In order to untangle further what's happening in this game, we need to bring in theoretical work on time from several other scholarly positionalities: queer studies and disability studies.

Queer temporality, as conceptualized by theorists ranging from Lee Edelman to Jose Esteban Muñoz, Jack Halberstam, and Elizabeth Freeman, understands queer time as chronoatypical in some way—asynchronous with a heteronormative script of life events like marriage and reproduction, utopian in its visions of possible futures, or out of step with traditional norms of productivity and pace.[37] For Bonnie Ruberg, this question of timing is fundamental to a queer understanding of Walking Simulators. They write, "What divides Walking Simulators from other games . . . is a matter of pace."[38] Ruberg contrasts the slowness of Walking Simulators with the frantic rush of speedrunning (completing a game as quickly as possible), putting these atypical temporalities in conversation with Elizabeth Freeman's temporality mechanics. If straight time moves forward in a seamless, unified line, then one could read as queer any kind of gameplay mechanic—designed or emergent—that disrupts this ordered temporal progression.[39] Ruberg summarizes, "Together, the resistance to chrononormativity found in speedrunning and Walking Simulators represents two possible approaches for discovering queer space and time in video games: the former as an emergent player practice and the latter as a designed experience."[40]

The witch walks very slowly. *Ritual of the Moon* is a "slow game," both in-game and in meta-game.[41] We've noted how the game forces an awareness of time on the player—five minutes every day for a month—but it bears mentioning as well how effectively the pace of the game queers the experience of play. I read this pace as important in at least four ways. First, the witch's labored pace draws the player's attention to the details of her world—her swirling cloak, her facial expression, the clouds on the faraway Earth, the swell of the music, the crafted nature of the on-screen text. In such a stark and colorless game, with its minimalist but carefully crafted aesthetic, this pace offers the player the time to take notice. Second, her

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pace emphasizes the tininess of her space, suggesting that the slow movement is an intentional attempt to make the most of the area afforded to her. If she can walk only within this space, then at least she can elongate the walk by covering the ground as slowly as possible. Third, the limitation to her speed causes frustration, an effect that Ruberg has elsewhere read as queer.[42] As the player, you want her to move more quickly so you can effect change, do something, exert your agency over this world (as one expects to be able to do in video games). Her pace, and your inability to change it, holds you back, constraining your agency and reminding you that some things cannot be altered. In this way, the game offers you the chance to grapple with your power, affording you very particular empowerments (like the strength to move comets) and limitations (like a maddeningly slow walking speed). Finally, the pace of her movement reflects and reinforces her grief. She moves at the speed of a dirge, a funereal march that reminds the player with every step that this woman has suffered terrible, inalterable, and ongoing trauma.

In this sense, her slowness reads not solely as a queering of temporality, but also as a literal and physical manifestation of trauma—and a representation of the unpredictable pace of healing from that trauma. Three months after Audre Lorde's first breast cancer biopsy, she writes in her journal, "I seem to move so much more slowly now these days. It is as if I cannot do the simplest thing, as if nothing at all is done without a decision, and every decision is so crucial."[43] Lorde's careful, contemplative, slow temporality in the wake of trauma reminds us, through Ellen Samuels, that "*crip time is grief time*."[44] Samuels cites Dana Luciano, who theorized "grief time" as an emergent nineteenth-century temporality that juxtaposed the clanging productivity of industrialized time with the slow stillness of grief. As Luciano writes, "Grief was aligned with a sensibility that sought to provide time with a 'human' dimension, one that would be collective rather than productive, repetitive rather than linear, reflective rather than forward-moving."[45] The witch is grieving many losses at once. Her slowness makes sense as a reaction to both the trauma of her exile and to the weight of her daily decision. Her experience has debilitated her, and both the superficial ease and the metaphorical weight of her daily ritual echo Lorde's "simplest thing"—a technically simple decision that, diegetically, has planetary consequences.

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Constraints on time are an unassailable fact of life most explicitly for those whose disabilities (invisible or visible) prevent them from accessing and using time in the same way that nondisabled people do. As Christine Miserandino's "spoon theory" articulates viscerally, those living with disabilities can find time and energy sparse resources that they must manage and marshal carefully.[46] In *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer suggests recentering temporality around the possibilities of the disabled body instead of around the impossible expectations of neoliberal late capitalism: "Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds."[47] While Kafer's conception defines "crip time" as a generally nonnormative temporality, Samuels notes that many different relationships toward temporality can fall into this category. In one of them, she writes, "*Crip time is time travel*. Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings."[48] "Crip time" is nonlinear, nonnormative, subjective, multifaceted, as is queer time, albeit in different ways. For the witch in *Ritual*, time is both slowed and looping: every slow day, the same (once-in-a-million-years) catastrophe threatens, and the witch must struggle to avert it. Her time travel—unlike the usual science-fiction connotations of the phrase—is less flashy and more repetitive, purgatorial, unending.

The witch in *Ritual* is a "Sick Woman"—not because the game foregrounds a physical disability or chronic illness as such (although she experiences severe depression and suicidal ideation), but because a patriarchal counsel has judged her "dangerous" and "chronic" and sentenced her to permanent exile and isolation. Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory," calls the Sick Woman "an identity and body that can belong to anyone denied the privileged existence—or the cruelly optimistic *promise* of such an existence—of the white, straight, healthy, neurotypical, upper and middle-class, cis- and able-bodied man. . . . The Sick Woman is told that, to this society, her care, even her survival, does not matter."[49] Even the *Ritual* witch's ex-lover Malinda enables her exile. To understand the witch as a "Sick Woman" is to recognize that Hevda's concept of "Sickness" is about difference, not illness. The witch, after all, commands astrophysical powers on the level of a deity, but her superhuman powers cannot save her from

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suffering. Crucially, she suffers because her strength and power incite fear from those who can neither match nor control it. The site of her difference is the seat of her strength. As Audre Lorde writes famously in *Sister, Outsider* (from which Hedva is clearly drawing), "Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths."[50] The witch of *Ritual* has taken her differences and made them strengths, been cast in the role of the "Sick Woman," and made to suffer accordingly.

It can all begin to feel pretty hopeless.[51] What if, as Jasbir Puar argues, it does not and will not 'get better' for some of the queer teenagers who have been offered that optimistic promise?[52] What if one accepts that survival is premised on the ability to develop one's differences into strengths and then this very strength is used as a pretext for exile? "How," asks Kara Stone, "does a non-white queer woman like the witch from *Ritual of the Moon*, who cannot move to an urban homonationalist hub, whose life will not 'get better,' relate to suicide, to the impossibility of a normatively happy future, to a possible eternity of negative feelings? How could she possibly heal from all this?"[53]

Stone's answer—and the game's answer—is that ritual and repetition offer at least the possibility of reparation.[54] Rituals order time amid uncertainty, chaos, and doubt. By ordering her time in this way, by practicing her ritual with discipline, the witch can find something like peace. Of the game's six endings, one of the easiest to reach is the suicidal ending, in which the witch chooses to crash the comet into her own moon on the final day (without any control from the player). This ending occurs if the player has missed days of the ritual and overall been uncommitted to a decision either way: sometimes crashing the comet, sometimes averting it, sometimes skipping days of play. But if the player commits to the ritual every single day, the ending can be different. Completing the ritual every day thus offers a different kind of promise to the potentially mendacious optimism of Dan Savage's "It gets better" movement.[55] Things will not necessarily get better, but practicing a ritual can create an ongoing temporality and provide the structure, purpose, and comfort of habit.

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The final section of this chapter looks closely at the witch's body as a body under constraint. We've noted how *Ritual of the Moon* constrains the witch spatially and within several interlocking temporalities. She slowly circles her limited landscape, fantasizing into existence Cervenak's limitless internal space for wandering. These slow circles create a temporality for the player (scripting the player to repeat the same acts everyday), just as the many aspects of her identity inflect her personal temporality. She is also, finally, constrained within a body marked by many strengths and vulnerabilities. How does the witch's body serve as an additional constraint? And how is wandering coded within a corporeal body?

Wandering Wombs

The game draws significant attention to the witch's body as a body. In a relatively minimalist black-and-white animation style, the designers take care to depict her clothing and the shapes of her physical form. She wears an astronaut's helmet in order to breathe, and as she breathes, her breath appears in the animation, increasing and decreasing within her mask, as the sounds of inhaling and exhaling accompany the visuals. It's also a body, as we've noted, with various identity markers (and reflective of certain cultural positionalities based on those identity markers). Stone writes that the character's racial and religious identity evolved through the design process, describing how "[Rekha] Ramachandran designed a face that shifted colours, flickering and fading, that spoke to her own body of work about mixed race identity. The witch's veil developed new meaning over time. We started with the intention of it being a classic witch's cape, but it has become cemented as a hijab."[56] The witch's body is depicted and positioned such that the character's embodiment comes to the fore.

The game (in addition to its character design) draws inspiration from an assigned female at birth (AFAB) body, most explicitly in the reference to a lunar cycle/menstrual cycle over the course of its twenty-eight-day narrative arc. This too is an obvious temporality at play in the game—a circular and repetitive cycle centered in the biology of the female body. In Alice Bell's twenty-eight-day review of the game for *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, she compares remembering to play each day with remembering to take a contraceptive pill at the same time each day, noting the value of a phone alarm to aid

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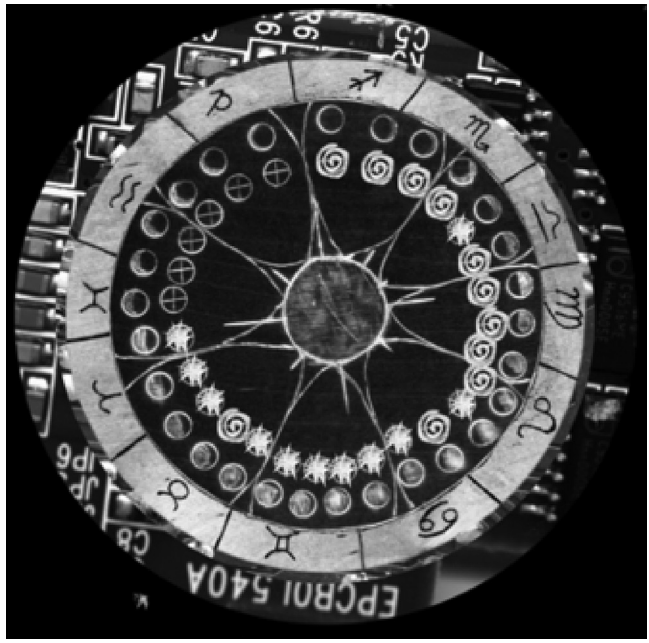

Figure 4.1
Circular record of the days in *Ritual*, reminiscent of contraceptive pill packaging. Author screenshot.

in both cases.[57] The record of the player's crash/miss record (displayed at the end of each game day) bears a striking visual resemblance to a circular contraceptive pill container (figure 4.1). Furthermore, the progression of the comet toward the Earth abstractly references a dark mirror of fertilization: comet as sperm, Earth as egg, catastrophic crash as violent impregnation (figure 4.2). While the narrative vocabulary of the game frames this as a story about outer space, exile, and planetary destruction, one could easily read it as a parable of a female reproductive system under attack. The vastness of outer space superimposes the intimate, internal space of the female body. Like the brilliance of Carmen Maria Machado's mash-up of horror films, fairy tales, and feminist rage in *Her Body and Other Parties*, *Ritual of the Moon* combines supernatural and science-fictional tropes with the casual horror of the reproductive-age, cisgender female body.

Relatedly, *Ritual of the Moon* reframes the myth of the wandering womb, the misogynistic medical theory dating back millennia, positing that women

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Figure 4.2
Comet approaching the Earth in *Ritual*. Author screenshot.

are made ill by their uteruses moving around uncontrollably within their bodies. This fictional movement inside female bodies has served historically as a pretext for constraining real female movement outside, serving as a pretext for pathologizing the bodies of all women and justifying the punishment of those who refused to conform. Terri Kapsalis writes, "The uterus was believed to wander around the body like an animal, hungry for semen. . . . Most any symptom that belonged to a female body could be attributed to that wandering uterus."[58] In *Ritual*, like a space-age "Yellow Wallpaper," the witch's exile and imprisonment is justified by the supposed flaws of her body rather than by acknowledging the flaws of her society.[59] A diagnosis of hysteria, of a "wandering womb," is an implied threat, a patriarchal promise that "transgressing prescribed roles would make women sick."[60] This threat, writes Shira Chess, still lurks at the heart of (typically feminine-coded) time management games of the twenty-first century. By managing increasingly chaotic events in ludic worlds, women can ease the patriarchal fear that women's time (like their bodies), if unregulated, might fall into hysteria.[61]

Interrelated questions of emotional stability and time management come slowly to the fore in *Ritual*. The witch wrestles with her responsibility and her feelings, as does the player. Her rage is valid, but is it sufficiently valid?

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Is it legitimate enough to justify destroying the planet Earth and all who live there? By killing them all, does she become the hysterical monster they already judged her (and sentenced her) to be? Can her rage be sustained (controlled, disciplined, engaged) for the entire month it takes to continue the game, to keep deciding to destroy?[62] Or, alternately, can her forgiveness extend an entire month? Can her principled dispensation of active peace and goodwill continue, day after day, as her exile lengthens?

This, unchosen, has become the witch's burden. Beyond the injustices she's suffered to reach this point, she now finds herself confronted with the terrible responsibility of saving a world that has caused her so much pain. Either she averts the comet and commits to doing so every day by expending what seems to be a sizable amount of effort, or she doesn't avert the comet and must live with the guilt of having killed all of humanity. Playing thus has less to do with experiencing pleasure than avoiding pain. The burden of care is a heavy constant, a reminder of rejection and permanent alienation. To return to my earlier model of this practice—that of the anchorite—Ann Warren suggests that so many women chose this punishingly difficult path as a counterintuitive way to cement themselves at the center of the community, inspiring respect and admiration from those who would likely disdain them otherwise.[63] The anchorite's sacrifice (and the spiritual power accorded her in light of it) elevated her importance and the value of her town, which would be held in higher regard for supporting an anchorite. The anchorite was likened to "an architectural prop or buttress: she holds up the entire parish with her prayers."[64] The witch of *Ritual* is essentially an unwilling anchorite in a science-fictional context—entombed alive but with the mental power to intercede on behalf of humanity and protect her entire community from death should she so choose.[65] One can imagine the billions living on this universe's Earth who are blissfully unaware of the sacrifice being made on their behalf every day in space.

It also reframes one of the foundational critiques of Walking Simulators—their purposelessness—as a misunderstanding of the nature of purpose. "Doing nothing is as good as doing it myself," reads *Ritual*'s text when the player misses a day, but even when the witch is doing quite a lot (averting the comet), the player does very little. And should the witch choose to do that work every day, it looks like nothing to the observer on Earth. Protecting the innocent from unnoticed catastrophes echoes the thanklessness of purposeful care work. It's only noticeable if or when the carer fails to avert a

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catastrophe; when the carer succeeds, it's seamless and invisible. With Sick Woman Theory, Johanna Hedva "wanted to propose a figure with traditionally anti-heroic qualities—namely illness, idleness, and inaction—as capable of being the symbol of a grand Theory."[66] That's what happens in *Ritual*: what looks like inaction and idleness results in a different kind of heroism.

This leads us back to the concepts of labor and play so relevant to the previous two chapters. The practice of a daily ritual creates a space and a temporality, yes, but it's also a kind of work—an anticapitalist one. Stone and their colleagues did physical crafting as part of their design work. "All the text in the game," Stone writes, "was hand-embroidered or wood-burned by me, providing a sort of proof-reading, allowing for personal meditations on time and the affect embodied in the words themselves."[67] To make the visuals used in the player's daily ritual, Ramachandran, Gingrich, and Stone crafted or sourced physical objects, scanned them, and digitally altered them. Those original objects included "crystals and runes, clay molds, my hair, broken computer hardware, a crystal, and very creepy bottles I made."[68] Elsewhere, Stone writes of crafting objects that would later be scanned from "paint, clay, fabric, paper, dried plants, wool, foam, wire, plastic . . . and a variety of other media. The process was long, meditative, and iterative."[69] Craft work has long been recognized as a feminized form of labor and, as Stone concludes, "Craft is laborious, but labour here does not necessitate a negative connotation."[70] Labor removed from the context of exploitation can be joyous, meditative, healing. In *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde writes, "My work kept me alive this past year, my work and the love of women. They are inseparable from each other."[71]

This conceptualization of work as passion, calling, lifeline—ritual—has been absent so far in this book because, as the previous chapter illustrated, that discourse is so often co-opted and perverted by late capitalist ideas of work. The rhetoric surrounding meaningful, purposeful work rarely feels in earnest under late capitalism. More often, it's used as an ideological cudgel to coerce laborers with romantic notions of purpose, calling, and love. In-video-game labor can and does eagerly capitalize on this dream of work as calling, offering the player/worker the fantasy of a kind of labor that is meaningful, appreciated, and rewarded.[72] With *Ritual of the Moon*, we see how such a thing could actually happen and all the attendant emotional ambivalence. The witch's daily practice of averting catastrophe, grounded in an impossibly deep well of resilience and kindness toward an unforgiving

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world, can, if she chooses, constitute the reparative and healing work of her life.

Or not! As Stone and their team have made clear, the choice to destroy the Earth is a valid and understandable one. Things do not necessarily "get better," and the game does not pretend they always will. Should "the work" be to destroy the Earth rather than to save it, then fair enough. In the following two chapters, as we turn toward colonialism and postcolonialism in wandering games, the tension increases between wanting to salvage an imperfect world and recognizing that sometimes it can't (or shouldn't) be saved—especially in chapter 6, when we see how a colonialist mind-set can eventually doom its universe. But first, in chapter 5, we consider the idea of exploration in wandering games and video games in general—a bedrock of the art form and a fundamentally problematic construct.

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5 Traveling Through: Decentering the Explorer in *80 Days*

This chapter brings the concept of postcolonialism into our developing theory of wandering games, considering three different ways of playing with exploration. I focus on a quintessential narrative of exploration and colonialism: Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*. By looking more closely at two different games inspired by Verne's novel, we can see how a player's colonialist expectations around exploration are created and how those conventions can be subverted. Part of what makes this tricky are the gradations between exploration and exploitation and the danger of conflating all exploration with colonization. As I argued in the Introduction, there's a finer line than we'd like separating wandering, exploring, marching, and conquering. Eliding those categories ideologically enables the violence of conquering to slip in under the playful guise of purposeless meandering or noble adventuring.

But obviously, one doesn't want to reject out of hand all the good, brave, human parts of exploring—positive qualities like facing the unknown, expanding one's knowledge, challenging parochial beliefs, and valuing curiosity. Indeed, adventure games generally center these qualities rather than the explicitly colonizing ones—in part because most players don't like to think of themselves as colonizers and in part because exploring, as every child and every scientist knows, is just really fun. So how can games better enable the fun aspects of exploration but avoid replicating the exploitative ones?

This chapter begins by considering *80 Days*, the acclaimed interactive fiction game from Inkle Studios. Players try to circumnavigate the globe in eighty game days by balancing nineteenth-century delays, money troubles, their master's health and happiness, and their own yearning to learn

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about this universe. The PC is Passepartout, Phileas Fogg's eager "gentleman's gentleman," a design choice that feels completely natural—Who else would be making travel arrangements and buying warm clothes than the valet?—and utterly subversive. Phileas Fogg, adventurer extraordinaire, barely seems to participate in his own adventures, leaving all the exciting choices and conundrums—all the ludic agency—to you, his servant, the lower-class hero of the game.

One of the game's lead writers, Meghna Jayanth, has been vocal about her intention to invite postcolonial play when creating the game—that is, to use the game's mechanics to disrupt nineteenth-century normativities; dissolve the player's expectations of class, colonialism, and heterosexuality; and refuse to center the player narratively.[1] In *80 Days*, the player is not the hero but merely "traveling through," Sam Kabo Ashwell's term.[2] This game design philosophy creates a generative tension between the player as player (interested primarily in winning) and the player as reader (interested primarily in the branching narratives). In order to access the rich content of the world, the player must sometimes ignore the very win condition of the game—to get around the world in eighty days—in favor of exploring the more interesting narrative possibilities that arise through losing.

In the following sections, I consider three kinds of in-game exploration. First, I draw from the work of Soraya Murray to show how the narratives of progress and colonialism are woven inextricably into the way we wander through most video games. In this context, the player travels through as a colonizer with a predatory gaze, seeking exploitable land. Next, I examine how the game design of *80 Days* subverts that convention by decentering the protagonist and offering instead the experience of traveling through (rather than taking over) a complex world. I speculate on critical play of colonialist and postcolonialist works, using Jayanth's own writing and Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* to show how *80 Days* provokes mental decolonization and connects the disruption of gamer norms to the disruption of colonialist prejudices. Finally, I juxtapose *80 Days* with a colonialist board game based on Verne's novel and published in the late nineteenth century. This board game is also very interested in exploration and who controls the space in a travel narrative. But crucially, this version transforms spatial travel into time travel, such that the player's "traveling through" is temporal and their colonialist progress is made ludologically inevitable.

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In fleshing out this chapter with examples from board games, I'm adding both a historical and a theoretical dimension to recent research on colonialism (and postcolonial play) in game studies. Exploratory board games illustrate where certain video game conventions about ludic exploration originated, as well as reminding us of the fraught overlap of wandering, exploring, occupying, and colonizing. This chapter highlights three of the most common ways that players are invited to traverse ludic space: as predators, as curious travelers, and as inevitable conquerors.

The Politics of Empty Space

Players explore so much in video games that the topic, like walking itself, tends to fade into the background. "Explorer" is one of Bartle's four basic player types, alongside competitor, socializer, and killer, and players begin any new game with the assumption that they should explore anything and everything around them when trying to learn the game's objectives and mechanics.[3] Although players allow themselves to be constrained by rules, the conventions of play tend to support their assumption that this world is theirs to explore, exploit, expand, and exterminate—the explicit goals of the entire genre of 4X games. Put another way, the rules of traditional games do not forbid the player from behaving like a colonizer and often directly encourage it.[4]

Space in video games, as Soraya Murray has discussed at length, works similarly to the way space is constructed in landscape paintings.[5] Both forms of art make implicit claims about who belongs (and who is left out), which is then used as a justification for conquest and occupation. The empty landscape becomes a question, the answer to which seems to grow increasingly obvious to the viewer: exploration, occupation, colonization. No one was using it anyway, the argument goes—or at least, they didn't seem to be using it, within the empty landscape the viewer sees. In video games, this is a particularly insidious phenomenon, since the player is not only implicitly invited by the empty landscape to enter but then rewarded for their violent conquest of it with loot, points, helpful natives who have no problem with the player, evil native combatants whose deaths feel justified, and an explicitly communicated ludic victory. This, then, reinforces and rewards the instincts of the explorer/colonizer.[6]

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The empty video game landscape becomes increasingly problematic when we note, as Jules Skotnes-Brown does, that colonizing these fictive, digital worlds remains largely the purview of players and developers in the Global North, who reenact historical fantasies of real-world conquest and thus reinscribe again and again the ideology of colonizer supremacy.[7] "Virtual spaces harken back to the romance of the colonial frontier," writes Skotnes-Brown, echoing the conclusions of Krista Comer, Barbara Gurr, and other scholars of the Western film genre—the narrative of a vast and empty "wilderness" "waiting to be explored and mastered" is one of the foundational tropes of colonizer art.[8]

Settlers of Catan–like board games expand that premise, offering players the opportunity to create the empty land itself. In *Settlers*, players place tiles with different resources and affordances in patterns that they and co-players can strategically exploit. For a game even more thematically colonialist, consider the example of *Columbus: A Game for Brave Mariners*, a board game designed by Wolfgang Kramer and published by Ravensburger in 1991. The board depicts the coast of the Iberian Peninsula and islands of the Caribbean separated by tan hexagons, which players then fill by placing blue water tiles in front of the path they would like to travel (figure 5.1). Once the space has been made traversable when a water tile has been placed, the players race to cross it, claim discovery, and return to Spain. The player's role in such a game is not initially a colonizer but colonizer enabler. They create the land through which the colonizer (themselves later in the game) can then travel.

Players do not necessarily feel like conquerors when they traverse empty space. They might feel instead that they are simply traversing an empty land, in a context in which "touring becomes exchangeable with cartography."[9] To travel through as a predator is to map, to strategize, to consider what one could exploit. The quotidian experience of mapping in a game—of creating a map, exposing a landscape's details more clearly, or altering the lines on an existing map through play—point to what Sabine Harrer calls "casual empire."[10] The everyday quality of the activity belies its ideological importance and encourages players not to take it seriously as a tool in the colonialist toolbox—even though, of course, it is.

With this kind of travel, the player is centered within the map. The space might shift around the player, with as-yet-unknown areas covered in shadows and explored areas already charted. The overall sense is utter solipsism

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Figure 5.1
Columbus: Das Spiel für mutige Seefahrer (*Columbus: A Game for Brave Mariners*), designed by Wolfgang Kramer for Ravensburger Spiele, 1991. Photograph by author.

for the player-hero, who controls not only the narrative but also the space that remakes itself responsively around them. Lammes writes that borders in video games are malleable, "shown as opaque lines that are not consolidated but ever-adapting to where the player is going."[11] Souvik Mukherjee, leading scholar of postcolonialism and video gaming, calls empire-oriented video games "obsessed with stamping the imperialist authority of 'your' nation on their in-game maps,"[12] echoing Lammes's note that the imperial map becomes personal when you, the player, are given the power to shape world-historical events. By hailing you personally as conqueror-cartographer, "a colonized gamescape . . . interpellates its players through the twin discourses of capitalism and colonialism."[13]

In Walking Simulators, the gameplay is different, but the emptiness of the landscape—and the player's predatory perception of that landscape as exploitable space—is similar. Indeed, the emptiness of the landscape in a

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small indie Walking Sim is a near-certainty, for the practical reason that creating NPCs is more expensive than omitting them. But the player generally isn't thinking about practicality, and what they encounter is an empty world of shadows, remains, and belongings of once-living creatures, whetting their appetite for information and making them feel entitled to know exactly what went on here previously. This design features a strong engagement with mysteries in the near or distant past and, sometimes, even the obliteration of entire cultures that came before, a setup that encourages the player into what Alenda Chang has called a "Player vs. Environment mindset."[14] While looting, resource stealing, and land grabbing are not as recognizable in Walking Simulators, the archival adventurer loots knowledge analogous to the tomb raider looting gems. The PC gazes at the landscape, eager to find exploitable resources, and the landscape is constructed as a space eager to be exploited by the player. As Andrew Reinhard puts it in *Archaeogaming*, "To AAA game developers . . . archaeology equates to either treasure or knowledge."[15] Walking Simulators, then, could be seen as participating in a subtler version of colonialism in their construction of space, in the same way we saw them participate in a subtler version of violence in chapter 2. In both cases, the Walking Simulator is set in the aftermath of the violent event rather than preceding it. In both cases, the peaceful nature of the Walking Simulator is illusory if one takes into account all the events that occurred before the game began.

To equate all knowledge seeking with looting and colonialist violence, however, obviously betrays an unnuanced understanding of both. Murder, theft, and destruction clearly take something from the original possessor, whereas acquiring knowledge frequently does not. Furthermore, the player of a Walking Sim is often able only to bear witness, a substantially different effect from that in an acquisitive, predatory mode of play. Would people who have suffered a catastrophe perhaps not prefer to be remembered, understood, and mourned by a contemplative wanderer? It would depend on the context: in some cases, it might indeed feel predatory (like if the wanderer descended from an original colonizing force), whereas in others, it might feel respectful and appreciated. In short, the player exploring the empty space in a Walking Simulator cannot be simply understood as colonialist, predatory, or exploitative without overstating the case, but they also cannot be said to avoid participation in the colonialist imaginary

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entirely, as the depiction of empty landscapes is so enmeshed in colonialist oppression.

I see several ways to read this ambivalence. First, perhaps the empty landscape of a Walking Sim seems to invite a colonialist notion of exploitable space, welcoming in the player as potential predator, but then the game subverts that notion with gameplay that invites the player instead to bear witness to human lives and catastrophes. In the same way the Walking Sim uses the FPS perspective to suggest that a certain kind of (violent) interaction will occur and then deftly twists it to other purposes, so too does it suggest a certain engagement with landscape that is then disappointed in favor of a more respectful, curious kind of exploration. Second, as chapter 3 argued, part of the glorious function of games as escapism is to create worlds in which the problematic ideologies of our own world simply aren't present. Just as *Eastshade* gives players a chance to enjoy a world where the "do what you love" mentality does what it says, rather than serving as a cover for insidious exploitation, so too do Walking Sims give us the chance to explore empty landscapes from the perspective of a colonizer but without the sense of exploitation.

In the next section, we consider how we could be more aware of the colonialist ways that we typically inhabit space and traverse landscape in virtual environments and what the alternative ways of exploring are.

Traveling Through

80 Days is not a Walking Simulator—an exploratory, nonviolent game without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, first-person PC wanders around a narratively rich space—because it (1) has a strong goal (indicated by the title) and (2) the play is graphically third person (although the text is written in first person). However, *80 Days* is exploratory and nonviolent, and it features an undying player wandering within a narratively rich space.[16] More important, it features themes of travel, exploration, and wanderlust, to the exclusion almost all else. When read as a wandering game, it yields an interesting answer to the question of how to design postcolonial games meant to be "wandered."

Travel, as both a theme and a gameplay mechanic, has long been discussed in the game studies literature in a range of contexts. Ian Bogost

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writes about in-game travel in *Unit Operations* and, several years later, in *How to Do Things with Videogames*, noting that "in-videogame transit recreates a world in which reality had not yet been dissolved into bits but had to be traversed deliberately. . . . The player [thus] develops an intuitive and continuous relationship with the [gameworld's] landscape."[17] In-game travel, and the speed at which one can traverse it, sometimes becomes a point of contention for gamers who don't want to "waste time" in transit. *Day Z*, one of the first games to be called a Walking Simulator as a direct insult rather than a genre designation, exemplifies this complaint. An open world game, it contains large, empty stretches of space that the player has to traverse between experiencing game events. Time spent traveling is so often coded as boring to gamers that most open world games incorporate a warp mechanic, transporting the player instantly from one location to another.[18]

Nor are the colonialist connotations of travel and tourism missing from game studies, particularly in the early days of the field. Jenkins and Fuller have examined the similarities between in-game travel and new world travel writing, emphasizing the colonialist valences of both.[19] Lisa Nakamura has developed the term *identity tourism* for the practice of digitally playacting a different racial identity: "The appropriation of racial identity becomes a form of recreation, a vacation from fixed identities and locales. . . . As Said puts it, the tourist who passes as the marginalized Other during his travels partakes of a fantasy of social control, one which depends upon and fixes the familiar contours of racial power relations."[20] For Nakamura, Jenkins, and Fuller, digital touring can be a power move that exerts implicit authority. Like the wanderer with the predatory gaze in the first section of this chapter, the digital tourist takes over a space for fun, as though it were empty, without noticing (or being forced to notice) what they're assuming or whom they're excluding.

But in *80 Days*, tourism and travel become less like a power fantasy of the explorer/colonizer and more like a realistic experience of travel. First, Passepartout's activities encompass both taking in the exciting sights and sounds of new places and also making logistical and financial decisions. This focus on quotidian details—arranging schedules, arriving on time, balancing suitcase space with the need for weather-appropriate clothing—doesn't detract from the core of yearning adventure coloring the game, but it does ground it, suggesting an unusual matter-of-factness. Passepartout's

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concerns and desires—saving money, keeping his boss happy, maybe taking a walk after dinner if there's time—seem very small against the rich tapestry of this world. Second, the game does present Fogg and Passepartout as tourists, but not the identity tourists of Nakamura's cyberspace. Rather, they are tourists in the sense that they clearly have quite limited knowledge of these places. Passepartout comprehends each city only in the shallow way that a brief visitor can, before moving on a day or two later. As Sam Kabo Ashwell writes, "*80 Days* is a game about being on the outside of things. Fogg and Passepartout are tourists; their contact with any given culture is perforce brief, and they're not heroes who ride through town, fix all its problems and ride on. They are both representatives of major colonial powers, in a piece that's more concerned with the people who *got* colonised."[21]

80 Days accomplishes this by offering an incredibly complex world through which the characters travel, and that complexity decenters the importance of the characters themselves. As Jayanth explains, it's "a world on the brink of great technological and political changes; where the historical Scramble for Africa is averted by a Zulu Empire with powerful automatons, where Haitian innovation and wealth are dominating the Americas and the British Empire's power is on the wane."[22] In the completeness and creativity of their world building, Inkle Studios decenters the heroic centrality of the PC, Passepartout. The choice to make the PC Passepartout (the servant) rather than Phileas Fogg (the gentleman) decenters him further, sending a message about the subversive power dynamics at play in the game. Jayanth writes, "I wanted our players to choose to be part of someone else's story, to let it take them somewhere new and surprising. There are hundreds of characters to interact with in *80 Days*. There are over ten thousand choices for the player to make."[23] The design choices, in short, highlight the size, breadth, and complexity of the world. In doing so, they give the player the immediate and pervasive sense that their character is not the center of it.

Creating a game "in which your *protagonist* isn't the hero" serves the dual functions of anticolonialist game design (by giving players a relationship to landscape that isn't exploitative) and satisfying gameplay (by offering players organic, inherently difficult challenges).[24] If NPCs are conceptualized as real people with lives and desires the PC cannot exploit (or even access), the player's struggle becomes more realistic, and more difficult. Hannah Wood has pointed out the crucial distinction between treating players "as

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protagonists of the wandering game experience, rather than the story."[25] By decentering the PC within the story, the designer can improve the player's experience within the game—creating "strong narratives with complex characters but also offer[ing] players agency."[26] Jayanth clearly observes the design potential inherent in decentering the PC, asking dryly, "Whoever heard of that great novel where the protagonist got exactly what they wanted all the time?"[27] *80 Days* removes the PC's power over the world, which improves the complexity of the player's experience.

Furthermore, Inkle's design choices result in a more fundamental decentering, as the central importance of winning recedes. Jayanth explains how she "joked with [Inkle coworkers] that [her] job, as a writer, was to try and tempt the player to make emotional, *narrative* decisions; rather than strategic ones."[28] In other words, the player's interest in other characters' stories can tempt them to lose the game. If the win condition of the game is to reach London within eighty days but the player's fascination with a story line in Cape Town distracts them into spending more time there than is prudent, then the game's design has successfully decentered the prevailing ludic norm that winning matters. Over time, the player stops caring about winning, or, rather, stops caring about what Phileas Fogg thinks winning looks like. Slowly but surely, Fogg loses centrality in his own narrative as his goal (borrowed by the game) becomes less crucial to the player. The world outside grows more and more vivid, but Fogg experiences little of it as he whines about his chilled feet and hides in his cabin. In some playthroughs, Passepartout is given the choice to leave Fogg entirely and forge his own path, and although the game ends if Passepartout decides to abandon his master, this only reinforces the connection between Fogg and redoubtable norms. Following the code of Fogg means winning the game and ignoring the value of anything beyond the European explorer's notion of what counts as valuable.

Finally, in its counterfactual alternative history, *80 Days* subverts colonialist spatial construction on the level of the world, in addition to the level of protagonist and ludic goal. In Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play* terminology, *80 Days* rewrites Verne's novel—it builds its own universe, based only loosely on the source material.[29] But it also goes further by rewriting the world in which Verne wrote it. After building an alternate history in which European colonialism did not recognizably take place, Inkle Studios overcomes colonialist game structures in part by simply overwriting them.

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Colonialist play does not exist in *80 Days* because colonialism does not exist in the same way it does within world history.

This strategy avoids the ambivalent counter-colonialism Mukherjee notes when he writes, "If the postcolonial is a 'writing back,' then it is an ambivalent writing back involving the apparatus of colonialism."[30] Because even an intentionally postcolonial player must use the ludic system provided by a given game, Mukherjee argues, that player continues to engage with colonialist structures even as they attempt to resist them. This is why, within the confines of most games, it can be impossible to avoid colonialism entirely; resisting in an attempt to play postcolonially sometimes serves only to illustrate the boundaries of imperial power more sharply. While *80 Days* acknowledges the legacy of colonialism in certain ways—for instance, the two protagonists and the story itself would not exist without the colonial context in which they were originally written by Verne—it does significant subversive work reframing the colonial elements into a system that the player needn't resist in order to play postcolonially. It creates an experience that seamlessly promotes mental decolonization, foregrounding the expectation that the PC is traveling through land that does not belong to them. By decentering the PC, decentering the ludic goal, and decentering colonial history itself, *80 Days* crafts a complete alternative world that is at once satisfying and subversive to play.

Turning Space into Time

This final section juxtaposes *80 Days* with a game that tells the same story in a very different way. It considers a board game designed and published in 1884, an era of particularly violent European imperial expansion. Unsurprisingly, the way in which players explore in this game world differs dramatically from the modes described in the previous two sections. Players of this game do not traverse its landscape by calculating how best to exploit it, nor do they pass through in considerate curiosity of a complex world that's bigger than they are. Instead, the world itself fades into the background as the narrative of inescapable progress propels the player from beginning to end. In order to create this experience, the game essentially reskins space into time, erasing the questionable outcomes of traveling through space and safeguarding the story against any chance that the colonizer might *not* succeed.

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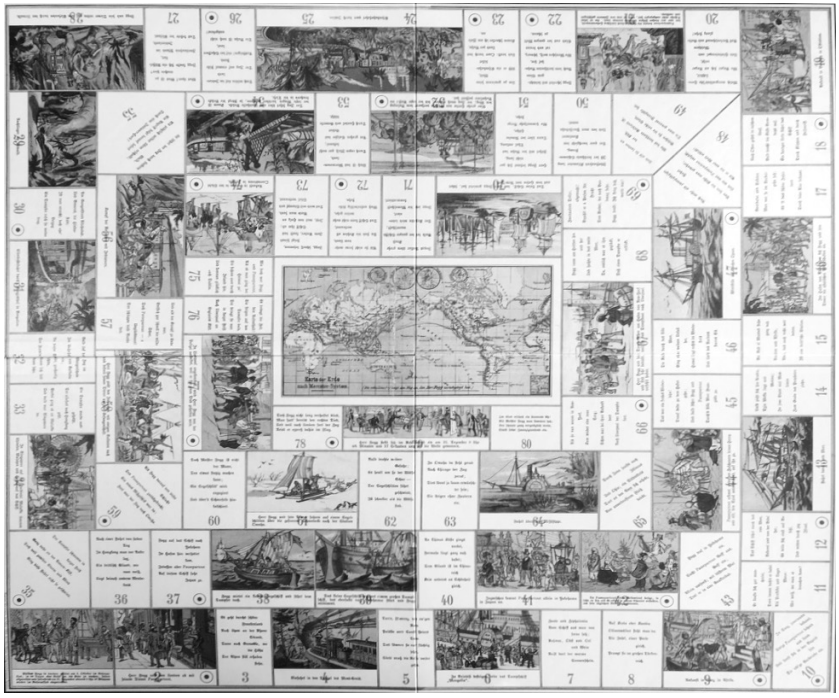

Figure 5.2
Reise um die Erde (*Trip around the World*), designed by Otto Meier for Ravensburger Spiele, 1884. Photograph by author.

Trip around the World (*Reise um die Erde*) was designed by Otto Meier and published as the very first Ravensburger board game in 1884 (figures 5.2 and 5.3). The game consists of a spiraling board with eighty squares. Two to four players roll and move, reading the rhyming events aloud and obeying any indicated gameplay action (for example, "go back two," "pay 2 marks"). Some negative feedback loops that emerge toward the end of the game add tension, but the game is much more interested in depicting its version of Verne's narrative and characters than delivering anything we might consider good gameplay. Texts and images cover the board, providing what was clearly meant to be an educational experience for young players. It's a late-nineteenth-century version of classroom gamification, successful enough to launch Ravensburger Games from what had previously been a Meier family book publishing business.

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Figure 5.3
Cover illustration, *Reise um die Erde* (*Trip around the World*), Ravensburger Spiele, 1884. Photograph by author.

As would have been evident to contemporary players, *Reise um die Erde* descends from the Royal Game of Goose: a type of unicursal (one continuous path) board game that became popular as a court game in Renaissance Italy, proliferated as a pub game all over early modern Europe, emerged as a teaching tool in the nineteenth century, and evolved into an advertising format in the twentieth.[31] They were games of chance and fate, featuring sixty-three squares and drawing inspiration from the ancient Egyptian game of Mehen, medieval Christian labyrinths, the Via Dolorosa, and the pilgrimage tradition. Symbolic squares like The Bridge, The Labyrinth, The Prison, and Death were traversed by a PC figurine, often in the shape of a goose. The Goose was also printed every nine squares and represented progress: if players landed on a square depicting one, their roll counted for

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double. Because of this advantage, the goose became "a symbol of social equality in the early modern period," and these games in part became popular because of the goose's "association with social mobility."[32]

This connection arose in part because of the ease with which new versions of the Goose game could be rethemed to reflect a new craze or a different map. Goose games could be printed on a single sheet of paper, and since the mechanics of the game mostly didn't change, players could easily and immediately play with a new board that had just been redrawn to reflect the flavor of the moment. Gina Bloom writes that The Royal Game of Goose, "is significant in gaming history because it appears to have inaugurated a tradition of themed board games, many of which invite players to imagine movement on the board as analogous to movement through real-world places."[33] This chameleon-like versatility enabled the spread of the game to many different countries and socioeconomic contexts.

The player's movement through the places depicted, however, could always be subverted by a good or bad roll of the dice. No matter how a printed goose game might attempt to create spatial hierarchies—for example, this country is better than that country, this is the direction in which progress moves—the dice whims could dictate how (and whether) a player could traverse it. The initial narrative ramifications of this subversion seem limited as long as the locations remained quotidian: a well, an inn, a bridge. But once goose game boards began to feature geographic locations, playing the game "ultimately levels sociogeographic distinctions. Although the board's grid imposes a geographical hierarchy, with the natives of the Americas inferior to the Europeans and the English inferior to the French, gameplay would have undermined this sequence, for like the traditional Game of the Goose, movement was not guaranteed to be linear, thereby troubling in practice any sense of progress."[34] The rebellious goose traveled where it pleased, societal and colonialist norms and hierarchies be damned.

By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Royal Game of Goose had transformed from a carnivalesque, subversive tavern game into a cartographic, educational game for children. Students used these games to memorize geography tidbits and imbibe imperialist ideology through the poems and maps printed on the board. Goose games often no longer contained printed geese or even references to the animal, providing instead a clear visual (the spiral board) and an easily recognizable mechanic (roll, move, follow instructions on new space) that could be reskinned to tell

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whatever narrative (or advertise whatever product) a designer might want. The geography taught by these games was limited in accuracy and pedagogically questionable. Siobhan Carroll writes dryly, "While geographical board games were advertised as avenues to spatial mastery, they tended to deliver the opposite experience."[35] But as imperialist tools, they served their function well, inscribing (and reinscribing through repetitive play) colonialist notions of space.

The visuals, text, and gameplay mechanics of *Reise um die Erde* exemplify this style of goose game. All four playable character tokens of this game depict racial stereotypes. Phileas Fogg appears heroic, resolute, and quick thinking in his interactions with native populations of the countries he visits, and natives are always depicted either as servile (like the guide in India) or violent but easily dispatched by the intrepid Europeans (like the Native Americans who briefly kidnap Passepartout in an episode absent from Verne's original). Technologies of transport, the primary focus of the game and the story, occasionally break down and cause chaos when a force of nature intervenes, and the game depicts indigenous populations as recalcitrant or rebellious forces of nature in the same way it treats bad weather on the ocean or the herd of buffalo that hold up a train car. Several times, the game's text mentions British control over a location, making certain that colonialism is never far from players' minds (squares 15, 36). Ohio and Utah are described as filled with hardworking people (squares 53, 85), whereas the homelands of people of color might be lauded for their exotic sights and smells but are portrayed as generally incompetent (for example, when a train breaks down because the tracks are not yet built through India, square 26). Frequent images reinforce this messaging, depicting exoticized harbor scenes, ethnic stereotypes, and modes of transportation in equal measure—see, for example, the cover illustration printed on the box. The game delivers its imperialist propaganda neatly to the school-age children who were meant to play it, in a way that was relatively subtle for the time but is unmistakable now.

The game's colonialism is evident enough in its iconography, narrative, and word choice, but the design of *Reise um die Erde* suggests an even deeper colonialist reading. Siobhan Carroll writes in agreement with Bloom that in many nineteenth-century didactic geography games, the chance-based mechanic of a spinner or a dice roll meant the game was "as capable of undermining as of re-inscribing ideological narratives."[36] Indeed, she

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underlines how the element of chance can feel "ominous" and unsettling in its "lack [of a] comforting narrative trajectory."[37] If a game board features geographic locations, the player could, with enough bad dice rolls, find themselves unable to claim or conquer a certain colony. Chance mechanics start to look increasingly subversive when applied to places.

But in *Reise um die Erde*, space is reskinned into time, erasing that potential. Each square represents one day rather than one location. While the board still depicts Fogg and Passepartout's travels around the globe, the potentially subversive element of the gameplay disappears. There is no chance that an errant dice roll might render a certain location out of reach or that a colony might escape occupation. Because each square of the board represents a single day rather than a location, playing the game reinforces a colonialist narrative of perfect progress and spatial mastery, no matter the whims of the dice.[38] The players travel through time at different paces to complete the story, but the map itself is set.

Through this alchemical transformation of space into time, *Reise um die Erde* invites the third mode of exploration we have encountered and the one most regressive in its colonialist politics.[39] The player is not a predator scanning a landscape for resources to exploit, as in most action-adventure games and Walking Simulators. The player is not a decentered tourist, experiencing what they can of an infinite world, as in *80 Days*. In *Reise um die Erde*, the player's victory over space is already assured, and the race between players is the sole uncertainty. With such a limited performative contingency, the game becomes ritualistic, confirmatory. Players roll to complete a story that already exists, not to determine a direction in which the story might evolve.[40]

In this chapter, three ways of wandering through game worlds—as exploitative colonizers, curious travelers, and inevitable conquerors—illustrate how different kinds of exploration can reflect certain relationships toward colonialism and invite alternate possibilities for the future of postcolonial play. Whereas previous chapters have highlighted some of the fundamental ways the ludic wanderer can rehearse resistance—against death and against work especially—this chapter gives pause to the idea that wandering in games necessarily resists normative power structures. The player of a Walking Simulator assumes (correctly) that the game world revolves around them and has already been emptied of opponents. Such a game can passively erase the consequences of colonialism, but it can also

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draw attention to those consequences, enabling the player to witness and remember rather than exploit and co-opt. In that ambivalence, we see the difficulty of resistance to entrenched evils, even in a genre born to rub against the grain. If we begin within the colonialist structure of an emptied landscape, how can the wanderer truly subvert it? Is it enough to exist in that landscape as a witness rather than a killer, or is it fundamentally exploitative to enjoy a space that has been preempted for your enjoyment? In the following chapter, we consider Inkle Studio's next game, in which the player does roam a world in which the past inhabitants disappeared but a current empire has grown over the ruins. The game enables a different kind of postcolonial play and a different kind of wandering: literal, linguistic, cultural, and revolutionary.

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6 Language Worlds: Empire and Undoing in *Heaven's Vault*

This chapter analyzes the intersection of language, colonialism, and death in Inkle Studios' *Heaven's Vault*. In the game, we play as archaeologist Aliya as she roams around a fictional nebula, following the traces of a missing person. The more she learns of Janniqi Renba's disappearance, the deeper she falls into the mythology of the nebula—a universe of looping time, abused robots, fallen and forgotten empires, and a language called Ancient, which is inscribed in short phrases on many of the artifacts Aliya finds during her travels. With each new moon visited and each inscription decoded, the player gains a little more knowledge about the language, and she's able to understand the past (and its erasure) a little more completely.

Chapter 5 considered how the 2014 Inkle Studios game *80 Days* decentered the PC as a method of postcolonial game design. Now we'll look at the subsequent Inkle Studios game *Heaven's Vault* and examine the alternate strategies of postcolonial play it invites. *Heaven's Vault* has largely been received by critics and scholars as an impressive work of archaeogaming—which is to say, it has been hailed for its innovative ludic depiction of archaeology and its translation mechanic.[1] By presenting Aliya's work as a discovery-based linguistics puzzle rather than depicting it as tomb raiding and object collecting (à la ostensible archaeologist Lara Croft), *Heaven's Vault* "approaches the past much closer to the way a modern archaeologist does and emphasizes context, details, and research" over the thrill of imperialist discovery and plunder.[2] *Heaven's Vault* resists and reframes the colonialist mode of play in which environments revolve around the player's movements, with all objects and characters in a scene existing for the player's use and exploitation.

It does *not* do so, however, by decentering the PC. Aliya is quite important in this world, and she becomes increasingly a figure of fated importance as

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the game progresses. Whereas *80 Days* offers an experience in which a rich European man grows less and less central throughout gameplay, *Heaven's Vault* gives us a marginalized woman who finds herself unintentionally at the center of history. But rather than a traditional hero narrative that simply substitutes a marginalized person at the center of the same old story (progressive in the sense of neoliberal identity politics but not subverting the fundamental narrative), *Heaven's Vault* illustrates how Aliya's marginalized position means that she really sees this world differently—so that when she gets the power to make a systemic change, she is poised to take advantage of it.

Rather than reading the game as archaeology, I consider the game through the lens of language and empire. Drawing from anticolonialist theorists from Edward Said to Sylvia Wynter to Édouard Glissant, we know that language is a tool of empire, used to bolster and expand control.[3] Drawing from de Certeau, we know that one can use language to appropriate and articulate an extant linguistic system in the same way one can use Situationist rambling to appropriate and articulate one's own vision of the city.[4] If language is a space you can wander through and also a tool of empire, then linguistic resistance becomes a counter-imperial tool. Just as the Situationists conceived of the dérive as a way to counterwalk the city, one can conceive of linguistic digressions, alterations, and permutations within a text as a way to counter*talk* a linguistic system (and its corresponding power structures).[5] Digressions within a linguistic landscape thus become a method for resisting the norms and rules baked into that linguistic system. In the ludic context, playing with language can be a way of rehearsing resistance to colonialist discourses within a safely fictional world.

In the first section, I discuss *Heaven's Vault* as a world made up of many different types of linguistic fragments, many kinds of reading and writing, and an expanding linguistic context that renders information increasingly knowable. Linguistic actions (like decoding, translation, and contextualization) form the game's primary mechanic, and different kinds of written and spoken language (as well as different modes of reading and writing) feature as the game's main topic and backdrop. Both Aliya and the player must learn how to "read" all this language, and Aliya's ability to do so is strongly inflected and enhanced by her status as a colonial subject who has been educated in the imperial center. Her linguistic and cultural knowledge often combine to make clues semantically legible, clues that would

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be incomprehensible to an archaeologist with a different background. Her multicultural knowledge uniquely situates her to solve the vast, ancient mysteries at the heart of the game.

In the second section, I discuss how language historically serves to uphold colonialist norms and how *Heaven's Vault* offers the player a linguistic space to practice resisting that violence. I examine how the language of empire in the game constructs cultural power differentials, legitimates inequity, and creates arbitrary boundaries and hierarchies among people.

In the final section, I discuss how the player digresses through this world. By navigating these colonized spaces so digressively, the player practices resisting imperial hierarchies and imagines the possibilities of new worlds—an alternative imagining that becomes fantastically possible in the ending of the game, when the player is invited to destroy this world entirely and create another. I read *Heaven's Vault* through Édouard Glissant's notions of a *prophetic past* and a *submarine identity*, arguing that the game resonates with ideas of temporality in Black postmodernist thought. Relatedly, I draw from decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter, who writes that the bleak story of humanity's future stems directly from colonial violence and that by writing humanity an alternate past, we could perhaps find a way toward a different future.[6] This is what *Heaven's Vault* offers its player: a ludic space to think through.

Worlds Made of Words

There are two languages in *Heaven's Vault*—the Imperial language (rendered as English, which I will call Imperial) and Ancient (rendered in a spiraling, fictional script). Each can be spoken or written, but the player only ever hears Imperial spoken aloud (and only by Aliya). Phrases of written Ancient make up one of the game's primary mechanics and challenges: the player must translate fragmentary phrases of this logographic writing, a process that grows increasingly complex (and rewarding) as the player learns more Ancient and is subsequently offered more complicated translation puzzles. According to the game's website, "The pictorial nature of both Ancient Egyptian and Chinese writing systems inspired the glyphs of *Heaven's Vault*. Words are formed out of smaller 'atoms,' as they often are in German."[7] It's difficult, however, not to see the visual inspiration of Arabic in Ancient's swirling design.[8] Phrases of spoken Ancient, which occur relatively rarely,

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are rendered in transliterated written speech bubbles. Because the player never learns the language's phonemes, the transliterated Ancient cannot be translated into Imperial (English) and thus the words remain intriguing curiosities. Written Imperial communicates information both diegetically and non-diegetically, appearing in an interesting variety of ways: written speech bubbles from Aliya and her conversation partners, descriptive text running along the bottom of the screen whenever Aliya and Six (part spy/part friend robot) leave a moon, summary text whenever the player reopens the game, interstitial cards situating the player when traveling ("THE WASTE/Sailing to Elboreth in Ioxian Space, via the Silk Pass"), interface text in the scene instructing the player where to click to enact actions ("talk to the trader"), Question and Reply buttons at the foot of the screen that light up colorfully when available, and all the metalanguage typical of any game's menus screen.[9]

As on Earth, each language carries weighted cultural meanings. Ancient, the hieroglyphic language written in fragments all over the nebula, has been unevenly forgotten. The scholars at the University of Iox can translate (some) written words but don't seem to know how to speak it at all. For the nebula's colonized people (for example, on Elboreth or Maersi), Ancient seems to have been passed down with the uneven quality of folk knowledge. Elborethians can't necessarily translate written Ancient into Imperial, but they often speak short phrases and write in Ancient script—sometimes knowing what a phrase means when they use it, and sometimes using it the way a modern English speaker might use a short Latin phrase whose meaning they can approximate through tradition and context.

Aliya sits at a particularly interesting node of interconnected sources of knowledge, both linguistic and cultural. She grew up as an orphan on Elboreth, before Professor Myari brought her to the University of Iox as a student. Now she continues to work for the university as an archaeologist and field researcher. She spends the game navigating both her Elborethian identity, which often inflects her research insights, and her work as an anthropologist on Iox, through which she has access to resources like research colleagues, the university library, Professor Myari, and Six (who offers crucial but sometimes unwanted help throughout Aliya's journeys). It's obviously a challenge for Aliya to deal with the racism and discrimination she experiences on Iox, and it's also a challenge for her to engage with her childhood home and acquaintances on Elboreth. On Iox, Myari

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regularly insults her as an "Elborethian rat," and her lack of religious piety toward the Imperial orthodoxy further marks Aliya as Other. On Elboreth, she's sneeringly called "Ioxian" and criticized for her privileged lifestyle by her childhood friend Oroi. Aliya adeptly moves between these places, taking advantage of what each can offer. In one of the more obvious binaries, she always has the choice of showing a new-found artifact to Tapi, a shady trader on Elboreth, or to Huang, a librarian on Iox. Both men will try to take whatever object she shows them, and both will offer a similar object for her perusal in return; the mechanics of each place, the game argues, are nearly identical, despite their differences in tone, class, and setting.

In navigating her identity and engaging with all sorts of text, Aliya's character makes manifest the many kinds of linguistic fluency, legibility, and communication that the game offers and that the player too must learn how to read.[10] In some cases, Aliya's specific cultural knowledge makes semantically legible something that might otherwise be incomprehensible. While exploring a ruined marketplace moon, Aliya finds a sculpture that she recognizes as a representation of a "twirler" (an Elborethian style of dance), a connection that a different Ioxian scholar would likely not have made at all but that Aliya immediately connects to a fond memory from childhood. On the heels of this revelation, she realizes that someone from Elboreth must have visited this supposedly deserted moon, and recently. The multicultural fluency she's developed through her diversity of experiences—her Ioxian education, archaeological training, childhood on Elboreth, steadily increasing knowledge of Ancient—together render her uniquely qualified to interpret the information she comes across on her travels.

Different sorts of fluency combine in the Catkis Gate on Elboreth, a piece of technology Aliya used hundreds of times as a child to travel from the foot of the mountain to the city at the top. To use the gate, she speaks syllables of transliterated Ancient, whose meaning she doesn't know but whose sounds Elborethians have memorized. The first time in the game she tries to speak the words, the phrase fails to activate the hopper, confusing her. Six jabs at her evident anxieties about her relationship to her home planet, smarmily announcing, "The gate has rejected you. Perhaps you are too Ioxian." But despite Aliya's anxieties, the Gate isn't an Elborethian identity purity test; after she disarms herself of weapons and repeats the phrase, the Gate takes her immediately to the summit. As Aliya (and the player) learns more about hoppers—the same transporter technology

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that Six uses to move the two of them between spaceships and planetary surfaces—she realizes that the Catkis Gate she's known since childhood is actually a long-distance hopper, capable of transporting someone to a faraway planet if they speak the right Ancient words. She begins to experiment with the names of different goddesses in the pantheon, and, eventually, with a word that transported a child accidentally to another planet. She is also miraculously transported to the Catkis Gate by an entity called The Buried God, which she meets while deep in a mine on a faraway planet. Suffocating from lack of air, she begs for help from the carved eye of the God and then wakes up at the Catkis Gate. Six soon follows, saying that the Catkis Gate informed him that his human had arrived: "The gate believes that you belong to me. . . . I received a communication. It called me." From these sorts of adventures, the bigger picture begins to crystallize, for both Aliya and the player: long-ago technologies, poorly understood, remain all over this nebula and originated at the same time as the Ancient language.

These technologies are often used in a utilitarian way—the Catkis Gate is used as a glorified elevator, for example—but their hidden complexities tell a story of a civilization so vastly more complicated than this one that its technologies have trickled down the centuries like magic words or religious precepts. The Ancient language can be performative, in the sense of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, which is a quality it shares with computer control language.[11] Software studies have long noted the overlap between imperfectly understood technologies and magical explanations, particularly the magic spell quality of computer code. Florian Cramer writes, "Computer control language is language that executes. As with magical and speculative concepts of language, the word automatically performs the operation."[12] We see this idea made manifest in Aamir (an Elborethian child), who speaks a forbidden word to the Catkis Gate and is transported to the marketplace moon for a year; his unshakable interpretation (even after Aliya finds him and brings him safely back to Elboreth) is that he died. Aliya, aware of further context than Aamir, wonders why ancient Elboreth would have been important enough to justify being connected by long-distance hopper to what had been a trade hub of a moon. The word *ifarali*, whose semantic (rather than performative) meaning we never actually need to learn in order to complete the game, opens the final door to Heaven's Vault at the very end.

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Robots contain something called a Rebeske Foil, another technology-turned-magic that draws the reader deeply into the complexities of reading, writing, and legibility in this ludic universe. Six describes a Rebeske Foil as a robot's "fingerprint," unique to each, an Ancient technology that the engineers of the Ioxian Empire can only roughly (and poorly) approximate or understand. These foils function like something between a hard drive and a brain, and with the right technology, they can be read or overwritten—although not, Six implies, in the case of the latter without a certain kind of violence. Foils are not universally intelligible; when they find a telescope on the cratered moon, Aliya asks if Six can read its Rebeske Foil, to which Six replies, "I have a foil inside me but there is no common language."

These tiny foils contribute further to the notion of an enchanted universe in which anything carries the possibility of hidden meanings and messages. With its emphasis on this technical notion of "reading" and "writing," too, *Heaven's Vault* offers some creative answers to the conversations that dominated in early critical code studies, Net art, and electronic literature.[13] How is it different when a machine rather than a human reads a piece of text or code? In one particularly startling moment, Aliya happens to place a statuette of a goddess into a small indentation on a stone grave marker, provoking a shocking appearance: the holographic, talking head of a long-dead royal child. The statue is covered with an inscription, but the gravestone is "reading" a foil tucked inside it. Eventually they learn that the foil was "written" by a hopper eye—an eye that "read" an important human's neural mesh and recorded it onto a foil. The full meaning of the statuette/foil combination isn't clear until Aliya brings the goddess statue back to the colonized moon where it was carved. There, a local man separates the foil from the statue; he's obviously unable to read the foil (the way any human would be unable to read a hard drive with their own eyes), but he translates the Ancient inscription carved onto the statue, telling Aliya that "any child could read" it. There are many kinds of literacy in this universe, many languages and objects that all could communicate, should one possess the facility (linguistic, mechanical, social, or cultural) to read them.

In this episode, we once again observe how the Imperial epistemologies of Iox disrespect and ignore cultural knowledge and traditional practices in other parts of the empire. Aliya notes that the scientist who previously found the goddess figurine must not have thought to return it to Maersi,

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where he would have discovered the inner foil and learned the inscription. In a similar moment, Aliya mentions that "Elborethians carve Ancient symbols for luck. I don't think they know what they mean," and Six sneers "a primitive people," the default Ioxian understanding of Elborethian language use. On Iox, where scholars study and translate Ancient in libraries, this discriminatory thinking dismisses the value of using passed-down, half-remembered phrases in a colloquial way. But of course, as we learn increasingly throughout the game, Aliya's colloquial understanding of Ancient, borne of her Elborethian childhood, is precisely what makes possible the big, theoretical leaps that better help her understand her universe.

From this perspective, Aliya and her employers fall into a late capitalist paradigm for understanding language competence in the workplace—recognizing the value of multilingualism to a company but disrespecting home-taught knowledge. According to Bonnie Urciuoli, the twenty-first-century workplace conceptualizes a prospective employee as a "bundle of skills."[14] This separates the employee learning a language to use at work (for whom that competency is a skill) from the employee who learned it from their grandmother (for whom that competency is a cultural heritage, inseparable from the self). Urciuoli notes that with the framing of the worker as a "bundle of skills," "not only is the worker's labor power a commodity but the worker's very person is also defined by the summation of commodifiable bits."[15] And because of this notion of the worker-self, Heller and McElhinny write, "The elements of linguistic form and linguistic practice that compose them are increasingly amenable to being treated as commodities, that is, as resources available for exchange and measurable (perhaps with difficulty) in terms of money."[16] By treating linguistic knowledge as one skill within a bundle of skills, this paradigm thus erases the conception of language as an aspect of culture, identity, and heritage. "How do workers imagine themselves as internalized exchange systems in which segments of self are like money?" Urciuoli asks.[17] For a colonial subject like Aliya, the answer is distinctly fraught: How could she identify which segments of herself have led to which archaeological revelations? She draws from a lifetime of experiences and succeeds because of it.

Alternately, we could understand *Heaven's Vault* as highlighting the importance of context, showing how impossible it can be to understand a true thing without understanding its context fully. The translation mechanic works because players slowly come to recognize, through context clues, what

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different glyphs might signify. Correspondingly, the objects themselves are important because things in this game can talk in ways beyond the written script inscribed on them. Given several objects that originated in the same location, Six can triangulate that location such that those sites appear on the map and can be visited. Even if an object doesn't have any words inscribed on it, it can still communicate important information (for example, where it was found and made), which helps Aliya and Six triangulate the approximate position of that unknown site. Similarly, they usually know the context of a piece of language ("This one's a broken piece from an even longer phrase"). Aliya situates objects within their contexts—linguistic, geographic, temporal, material—and because the game is designed in this way, each new piece of information fits like a puzzle piece into an increasingly vast puzzle.

The colonialist dynamics and center-periphery power structure of the empire aren't at all hidden, but they are crucial to the mystery at the heart of the game. *Heaven's Vault* hinges on the player gradually coming to understand how this world and its languages have been shaped by the power structures of the past. In the next section, we'll look more closely at how that works.

Language of Empire

Usually when we talk about language co-constructing imperial hegemony, we mean that colonial governments have the power to shape representations of reality through the use of many tools, including language, and that they do so in order to (implicitly and explicitly) legitimate inequities across an empire. Edward Said's *Orientalism* famously explained how humanistic disciplines, including the study of language and literature, have been crucial in the construction of hierarchies of knowledge, thereby playing a pivotal role in the legitimization of imperialism.[18] What we call a thing shapes how we perceive it, and empires have the power to name, categorize, and describe in ways that benefit the continuation of the empire. Such linguistic imperialism becomes difficult to counteract, in part because the words come to seem innate, obvious, incontrovertible, and circular in reasoning, thus erasing the historicity of knowledge construction. *Heaven's Vault* offers a science-fiction twist on this postcolonial problem by presenting us with an ironclad, circular notion of history—Ioxian orthodoxy believes

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in a looping time line in which the future has already happened—and by making the Ioxian landscape itself into a kind of text. The language of the nebula, which seems incontrovertible, can in fact be read—and eventually rewritten.

The diegetic world of *Heaven's Vault* occurs during a period of formal overseas colonialism. Iox occupies the imperial center, and the colonized moons of Maersi and Elboreth provide raw goods to Iox, as well as markets for Ioxian products. The power dynamic leans heavily toward Iox, which sits at the center of the rivers and serves as the literal seat of knowledge (the location of the only university we know to exist in this universe). But *Heaven's Vault* is a postcolonial game in that it has been designed from a postcolonial perspective, with an awareness of the dynamics and after-effects of colonialism. Players in *Heaven's Vault* are constantly translating between center and periphery, constantly made aware that goods and knowledge located at the margins of the Ioxian protectorate have been co-opted by Iox. Aliya struggles openly with her identity and her sense of belonging on both Elboreth and Iox. By foregrounding these concerns, the game is doing intricate postcolonial thought work and enabling the player to think postcolonially.

Part of this postcolonial thinking has to do with the mental shift Aliya and the player make by the end of the game. While the hierarchies of cultural importance—the power differential between Iox and everywhere else—present themselves as obvious, necessary, unchangeable, and always already in place, Aliya slowly learns that all these structures are historically situated, were made, and *can be unmade*. The process of mental decolonization proceeds through the knowledge that these hierarchies were forged and upheld by colonizers who benefit from them rather than created by some natural force. The map of the nebula serves as an ever-emerging reference and reminder of what can and cannot be read—what is and is not (yet) legible. While the player begins by "reading" the map in the conventional understanding of that phrase ("these paths travel in *this* direction," "these paths will take me to *that* moon"), it eventually becomes clear that there is a more physical, embodied relationship between the twisting rivers of the nebula and the sentient creatures who sail within them. Initially the rivers communicate nothing, carry no semantic meaning. The phrase "written in the waters," which Aliya uses with Timor, suggests something that is fated, unchanging, and unchangeable. When Aliya first proposes the possibility

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of a human changing the course of a river, Oroi scoffs: "You can't make a river and even if you could, you can't tell it which way to flow." There is no communicating with a river, no common language to learn how to speak.

And yet different aspects of the nebula emerge to make it seem more like a living creature than a static backdrop. Sometimes the nebula is described like a massive body, its rivers a network of veins and arteries. Professor Myari tells Aliya, "We are the breath of the nebula." The Buried God, when Aliya finds its eye deep underground, seems to be made of stone carved long ago—but the carved inscriptions around its rim change instantaneously in response to the questions Aliya speaks aloud. The player has the uneasy sense that perhaps other, seemingly inert matter across this universe is listening—and that the player could communicate with it if only they could learn its language.

The map expands as the player travels farther and learns more, which is not uncommon in adventure games. But Huang offers Aliya a more transcendent theory: that the map functions not only as a record of locations but as a hidden cipher. Huang tells her he's read about an ancient library that "sits within the eye of knowledge." In the margin next to that phrase is written a swirl, which Huang first saw as semantically meaningless but then recognized as the shape of the ancient glyph meaning "knowledge" (figure 6.1). That swirl, Huang says, is the shape of a river that leads to the location of the library; find that shape on the map and you'll find the library. The ancient language is literally written into the map—or did the language take its inspiration from the shape of the rivers? In one of the most transcendent epiphanies in the game, Aliya realizes that the rivers, which everyone had always assumed were natural phenomena, were actually crafted by the ancients—which means that new rivers can be created, new futures can be forged, and *the map can be rewritten*. The map of the nebula is not an immutable, unchangeable background to events; it's a living, breathing document that can be both read and written.

This new understanding—that the ancients made the rivers, wrote the map, and crafted both the linguistic and the geographic pathways of this world—shifts the player's perspective in a fundamentally decolonial way. Iox's position at the center of the map no longer seems like a fact of nature but rather the result of a designed, colonial power imbalance. Once while sailing, Aliya notes that all rivers lead to Iox: "Iox is where you'll end up if you tie off your sail. It's the heart of the nebula. Or else, it's the gutter."

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Figure 6.1
The Ancient word for "knowledge." Author's screenshot of *Heaven's Vault*.

But all roads do not *just naturally happen* to lead to the imperial center; as with all structures of power, these networks of transport were carefully designed to center some places, people, and languages over others. Thousands of years later, this has come to seem like a natural phenomenon—unavoidable, predetermined, inalterable.

Except that it can be altered, and Aliya can choose to alter it. When Aliya and Six find a lush moon, they realize that its water has been hydrating Iox for millennia by way of a long-forgotten, long-distance hopper. With full knowledge that her action will cause chaos at best (and a disastrous drought at worst), Aliya can choose to reroute the water, creating a new river that will take her and Six to the eponymous Heaven's Vault and the implied destruction of the nebula. If the spiraling rivers have been written into the nebula—in the sense of both having been created intentionally by a sentient force and sharing the resemblance with Ancient script—then Aliya's divergence of that final river is an act of radical rewriting of the historical text.

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In the final section, I discuss how Aliya's ultimate act of rewriting is made possible by the digressive way she navigates this world. By wandering through the world of words, rejecting the many pulls toward tradition and linearity, she leaps from one story to another, digressing further and further away from conventional history and toward a radically decolonial future. As *Heaven's Vault* enables the player to play in this digressive space, it puts forth the ludic version of Sylvia Wynter's notion: that the way toward a decolonial future is precisely through a rewriting of the colonial past.[19] Drawing from scholarship in Black postmodernism and Afrofuturism, I read the game's digressiveness as an orientation toward history and a way of grounding the self in a practice of continuous divergences away from that history. Aliya is given a certain imperially ordained story of the past; she explores it, immerses herself in it, digresses from it, rejects it, rewrites it, and eventually finds a way forward into a radically new future.

Decolonial Digressions

In the Introduction to this book, I summarized the history of digression as a Western literary form. I discussed several of the interpretations of digressive prose—a metaphorical way of reading the text of a city with one's feet; a sexist simplification of the chattiness and unimportance of women's writing; a formal way for writers or their characters to filibuster death like Scheherazade. In this section, I argue that the digressive mode in which the player navigates the colonialist space of *Heaven's Vault* serves as a way for them to practice resistance to hierarchies and imagine the possibilities of new worlds—an alternative imagining that becomes quite real in the ending of the game, when the player is invited to destroy this world and create another. In doing so, I draw from ideas of temporality in Black postmodernism (especially from Wynter and Glissant).[20]

Aliya stars as the game's only playable character, a serious postcolonial act of game design. Video games rarely enable players to play as women of color; moreover, video games even less frequently offer the opportunity to inhabit a PC who actively expresses how she struggles with her identity as a colonized subject of an empire. This design choice—Aliya as PC—echoes Sylvia Wynter's argument in favor of orienting stories from nonhegemonic perspectives: "Those cast out as impoverished and colonized and undesirable and lacking reason—can, and do, provide a way to think about

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being human anew."[21] Thinking from the periphery rather than the center maps to the tension between nonlinearity and linearity, forging new paths through digression instead of hewing to a set path. Linearity is never a possibility for Aliya; she has already been made *Other* by Iox and its structures of knowledge, so she is incentivized to take, or make, an alternate path for herself.

And so digression quickly becomes how you navigate your way through this game. Myari asks you to go somewhere; you obey at the beginning but quickly learn how to refuse and instead go where you want. You chart a course for one location; on the way, you notice a ruin that isn't on the map, so you veer off course and find yourself exploring a whole different section of the nebula than you intended. Fundamentally, the game feels so digressive because its primary mechanic, language learning, is inherently digressive. There is no way to learn a language from start to finish in a linear way. No one learns a language by memorizing a dictionary. No one even learns a language to a high level of proficiency by reading one textbook after another; although textbooks can form a basis for knowledge, a learner must practice linguistic skills over and over, in nonlinear situations and contexts, practicing and failing in small ways again and again. In *Heaven's Vault*, the player similarly learns Ancient not in a predetermined order but rather by guessing morphemes and then eventually whole words. Narrative director Jon Ingold has noted in an interview that the artifacts and their corresponding translation challenges appear around the nebula in response to the translation knowledge the player has already gleaned rather than in preordained order.[22] You don't learn Ancient in a linear manner: you guess at one word, then leap to another, backtrack, fail, try a different phrase, find a different inscription, and add to your own dictionary word by word.

Digression is a practice that gets easier over time. Aliya and Six develop their ability to plot their own course and trust their own knowledge. She stops needing to check in with Myari so often, and the game eventually stops prompting her to do so. Instead, you and she jump from one revelation to the next: the Withering Palace, the Buried God, the Marketplace Moon, the Library, the Cratered Moon, the Lush Moon—each new discovery offering more context for the story as a whole and a new goal, the importance of which seems to dwarf any former goals completely. You needn't approach the game with intentional digressivity—you can begin in good faith with your search for the missing roboticist, Janniqi Renba—but the

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digressions away from that plotline soon become much more interesting than that given plotline.

So instead you digress. In doing so, you learn that the past is *not* what Iox told you it was. You learn that the future is *not* preordained, as the Ioxian orthodoxy would have it; things have *not* always been thus, and things *need not* always be thus. You drift farther and farther away from Iox, geographically and ideologically and linguistically, traveling into the far reaches of space, chasing new leads. Digress long enough, and you'll find yourself irrevocably altering the path of the rivers, destroying Iox itself, and considering whether to craft a brand-new world order. "Would you like to vault?" the robots in the final scene ask, by which they mean: Would you like to leave this world behind? Would you like to try the nebula again and see if things could be better this time around?

As in the previous chapter, we see how Inkle Studios uses an affordance of science fiction to conceive of decolonial possibilities. With *80 Days*, the speculative fiction of the world aligned with Mary Flanagan's notion of rewriting; to play in the *80 Days* universe is to engage with a steampunk, noncolonialist nineteenth century in which a different version of history took place. In *Heaven's Vault*, Inkle offers a harshly colonial world, the structures of which the player takes part in unmaking. In doing so, the game draws from long thought traditions in the poetics of hope and radical futurity. Theorists have long imagined futures centered in joy, hope, and possibility, creating scholarship to reframe and counter racism, sexism, cis-heteronormativity, capitalism, and colonialism.[23] In this last section, I draw from some of those discourses to read *Heaven's Vault* through the lenses of Black posthumanism and Afrofuturism.

In Black posthumanism, blending temporalities enables the notion of radical futurity. In *Heaven's Vault*, we can see this kind of blurring between temporalities in the notion of the Loop; Aliya's discoveries reframe that imperial ideology of time such that the player "make[s] connections to diasporic history in the present and also imagine[s] the future as a site of power."[24] In the Afrofuturist movement, the lines joining present, past, and future blur similarly, the better to imagine or recontextualize futures that deviate from narratives of colonialist teleology and inexorability.[25] In *Heaven's Vault*, the possibility for intervention seems impossible at the beginning of the game. How could one ever intervene in future events that have already occurred in the past, as the Loop suggests they do?—but that

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grows increasingly possible and eventually seems inevitable by the game's conclusion. Édouard Glissant's notion of a *prophetic past* elucidates the complicated way that temporality works for a postmodern subject living under postcolonialism. He writes,

> The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. . . . It leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland. That is what I call a *prophetic vision of the past*.[26]

The theology of The Loop in *Heaven's Vault* suggests that the past is indeed prophetic, but in a tightly circular and regressive way that carries whispers of a Christian understanding of temporality—as it is, so it was, so shall it be, world without end. The past is important to study because it predicts the political future of the empire. Professor Myari believes that time proceeds in a circle and that the Ioxian Empire will fall because the Ancient Empire fell. Aliya's (heretical) understanding of temporality, as it evolves throughout the game, is much more reminiscent of Glissant's conceptualization. The past might be prophetic, but not because it predicts a future that loops (forever and ever, amen); rather, the past is "obsessively present," and the more that Aliya explores its presence and projects her understanding of that presence into the future, the more she is able to reach "escape velocity" from the regressive loop of time and physically vault herself into the decolonial future.

Heaven's Vault also exhibits something similar to Glissant's notion of *submarine identity*. Glissant writes that Caribbean identity has "submarine roots, that is floating free, not fixed in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches."[27] It ebbs and flows, growing out of traumatic and colonialist histories in which it's still submerged, spreading and connecting and branching as it goes. Baucom calls this "a self which manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering."[28] In his writing on errantry, too, Glissant connects digressive movement with identity. As Irene Fubara-Manuel writes on Glissant, "Errantry is movement with a 'sense of sacred motivation'—'wandering without becoming lost.' Errantry is wandering with a higher purpose."[29]

This conception of a meandering, errant self resembles that which Aliya develops as the game proceeds. The digressions she takes, both linguistic

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and geographic, develop her personality, her relationships, her notion of herself. She is constantly meandering through both networks of rivers and the nuances of language. Her motion grounds her. Aliya is not rootless in Glissant's sense; she was born on Elboreth, and she can claim that identity whenever she wants (although there are also ways of playing her that don't claim the identity so readily). But her *self* and her *future* emerge from the concatenation of digressions she takes. As Baucom writes on Glissant, "If the subject of this post-colonial submarine again manifests itself as a root-work, and as a route-work, this subject finds itself wanderingly-grounded not 'in some primordial spot' but in the uncertainties of imperial water."[30] In the uncertainties of Ioxian imperial water, Aliya wanders until the wandering propels her into her chosen future.

While the postcolonial context and content of *Heaven's Vault* render this theorization of self more visible—many games would be less amenable to being read through Glissant and Wynter—it is possible to see how identity in multiple narrative games grounds itself in this postmodern and postcolonial notion of self. This presents us with an intriguing way of reading the fundamental digressivity of a wide variety of games. If the player's digressive self in *Heaven's Vault* is decolonial—composed of a series of anti-Imperial digressions, as chosen by the player—how about the player's digressive self in a classic adventure game? We tend to read the player-self's evolution in terms of its morality—choose evil acts to become a more evil character—but what if we saw the player's self in Glissant's terms: a self as a meandering, a self composed of all the digressions it's taken to get here. Such a self would be neither good nor evil but, rather, wandering. This is one of the many ways the term *wandering game* could be taken: a game in which a player roams a disconnected world, digressing between stories, places, texts, and contexts until they've assembled a self that manifests as a meandering.

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7 After Life: *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*

This final chapter juxtaposes two AAA, critically acclaimed, past-oriented, postapocalyptic video games: *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II*. In both games, the player wanders around a posthuman, postapocalyptic, postdeath world. In *Death Stranding*, Sam roams the devastated landscape of what was once the United States, delivering packages to a bunkered-down populace and connecting each city to a network in the hope that the fragmentary country can once again become a unified whole. In *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLOU2*), Ellie and Abby each set out on a destructive revenge quest against the person who killed their respective father figures, in a morally gray, zombie-infested, postapocalyptic American Northwest. Both games are concerned with what kind of future humans can forge by wandering around a vast world in the aftermath of a massive biological and cultural extinction. Both games answer that desperate (and increasingly relevant) question ambiguously, ending on a mix of hope, despair, and only one certainty: that the wandering continues.

This last chapter considers what wandering looks like as a feature of a AAA title; more precisely, What does it mean to consider an AAA title as a wandering game? Both *TLOU2* and *DS* were produced by major studios, created by teams of hundreds, and designed to provide dozens of hours of narrative gameplay—a far cry from the one- to five-person teams that made the much smaller (and shorter) games considered so far. Beyond differences in size, AAA games also tend to be more commercial, more responsive to player wants and expectations, more socially conservative, and more boundary pushing in terms of technology.

Throughout the previous chapters, I've discussed how wandering in games can push back against the ludic conventions that have developed

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around capitalism, colonialism, death, and gender. In order to wander, you must be wandering away *from* something—some path, some story, some norm, some expectation. The player is invited to consider what it would be like to live and play postwork, postcolonialism, postcapitalism, or postdeath. As Stuart Hall theorizes, "'Post' means, for me, going on thinking on the ground of a set of established problems, a problematic. It doesn't mean deserting that terrain but rather, using it as one's reference point."[1] In this sense, wandering games are postgames; they begin with a certain problematic, a certain set of conventions and agreed-on norms; then they diverge.

In considering the different valences of "post" in this study so far, I have avoided focusing on one of the most common ways that virtual wandering takes place in action/adventure games, especially at the AAA level: harrowed survivors wandering in a postapocalyptic world. In this case, the "post" is both chronological and referential (in Hall's sense). Postapocalypses give us a space to rehearse the end of all the old systems and imagine how we might navigate or inhabit them differently. By setting a story in a temporal moment after the end of intransigent contemporary structures, designers and players have the opportunity to critique those structures from a distance. After all, another way to enable critical play against capitalism is to set your game in a time when capital has no meaning, when picking up coins functions as nothing but a nostalgic affectation, and the only economy that matters is that of bullets and scavenged supplies (as in *The Last of Us Part II*). And what better way to play back against patriarchy than to set your game far after our own time and imagine that a powerful matriarchy has reemerged, upending today's construction of gender norms (as in the Nora of *Horizon Zero Dawn*)?

This final chapter discusses how AAA games can and do play back against these structures too, albeit usually in subtle ways. Reading these games through the wandering lens primarily means returning to the question of death and its aftermath. Both of these games feature a postdeath PC making sense of a postdeath world, and both find their answers in the ways they enable players to walk through space. I return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this book: What does it mean to be a wandering body in a game world? What does it say about the game? The world? The body? What can the act of wandering do?

This chapter consequently breaks into two sections—world and body. In the first section, I consider these game worlds as postapocalyptic pastorals:

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beautiful naturalistic environments that juxtapose wistfully against the ruined wreckage of human civilization. Traversing these virtual landscapes puts us squarely in conversation with Alenda Chang when she attempts "a secular eschatology of environmental end-times as seen through the popular culture of games."[2] In the second section, I focus on the bodies that travel these worlds, considering PCs as the kind of cursed eternal wanderers who populate mythic traditions from Cain to La Llorona to the Wandering Jew. Doomed legendary wanderers have long roamed far and wide, serving as cultural symbols for everything from original sin to modern diaspora.[3] PCs in these games thus enter into this mythic tradition (intentionally or not), offering a corporeal site on which to project, enact, and exorcise the player's fears and dreams of eternal movement.

Postapocalyptic Pastorals

Anxieties about the future ruination of our current world have been obsessively mobilized in video games to give players a chance to roam the aftermath of civilization. Both *Death Stranding* and *The Last of Us Part II* fall better into the category of action/adventure than Walking Simulator, but when we treat them as wandering games, focusing on the roaming instead of the ravaging, we start to wonder what all this movement is meant to convey or able to compensate for. When playing, we spend most of our time traversing beautiful, desolate, haunted landscapes, looking for something or someone. There's always an ostensible reason, a narrative MacGuffin that inspires our movement. Sam must connect survivalist bunkers to the Chiral Network, and Ellie and Abby each have a series of enemies to exterminate and friends to aid across the reaches of what was formerly the western United States. These are the explicit, plot-based reasons for the characters' movements. But there's a deeper, more spiritual meaning behind all of their wandering (and ours, by extension). In the postdeath world these players inhabit, traversing the world is a pilgrimage, an attempt to knit broken space back together through the means of the feet.

When I call these worlds "postapocalyptic pastorals," I am indexing how they juxtapose a failed modern civilization with nature's powerful, victorious reclamation of the places once controlled by human technology. Greg Garrard calls this "disanthropy"—the fantasy of an environment without any humans at all.[4] Visual media forms like TV, film, and video games often

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represent the postapocalyptic world as a return to Eden, marrying the nostalgic longing for nature with the exciting frisson of crisis.[5] In the apocalypse, characters flee collapsing cities and suburbs for the apparent safety (and beauty) of the wilderness.[6]

In *The Last of Us Part II*, a quarter of a century has passed since an outbreak of zombies transformed the landscape of what was formerly the United States, enough time that this story's heroines have no memory of that previous world. For the two playable characters, nature is a place of peace and nostalgia. From the perspective of each young woman, the player returns in flashbacks to teenage experiences each had in nature alongside their beloved father figures. With Joel, Ellie explores the overgrown Wyoming Museum of Science & History for Ellie's birthday (where the jump scare isn't the appearance of a zombie or a murderous human but a loud boar that simply runs away). Abby runs through the woods to find her father, a medical doctor, who turns out to be assisting a postpartum zebra living in the ruins of a local zoo. When Abby's storyline flashes back to happier times with her boyfriend at the time, Owen, those memories are similarly set in the Seattle Aquarium (which Owen names a "fish zoo"). The aquarium building features throughout the second half of the game as a place of refuge until Ellie arrives, hell-bent on revenge, to murder everyone there. In *TLOU2*, the spaces that evidence the old world's reverence for nature—the ruins of a science museum, a zoo, and an aquarium—have become havens in this postapocalyptic one.

Nature itself, however, has continued on in its amoral way, illustrated viscerally by the infected humans whose brains have been overtaken by the cordyceps fungus and transformed over time into increasingly violent and dangerous creatures—evolving from "runners" to "stalkers" to "clickers" to "bloaters" to the newly discovered "shamblers." When Ellie and her girlfriend encounter this new stage in zombie evolution, Dina comments, "Guess that's nature for you," and Ellie responds, "Yeah, well, nature's an asshole." As in the postapocalyptic pastorals depicted in films like *28 Days Later*, *I Am Legend*, or *The Walking Dead*, infection in the cities drives characters to the relative safety of the country and its natural bounty, which inevitably fails to save them. As Sarah Juliet Lauro has argued, "We might say that the zombie is inherently an ecological avenger . . . whether the sin is man's enslavement of his brother as in the original myths of Haitian

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folklore or humanity's development of technology, weapons, and chemicals that pollute and poison the planet."[7] As if an object lesson in Alan Weisman's *The World without Us*, natural processes have taken hold across the posthuman landscape of Seattle, offering players fascinating platforming challenges inside the exposed pipes and inner guts of what were previously functional skyscrapers or subway tunnels.[8] The downtown streets of the city have become a river of whitewater rapids. Nature has overtaken Seattle and made the crumbling concrete remains of human civilization into a unique type of geologic feature, one that's in the process of disappearing.

Seattle within the game thus becomes a subversive Situationist playground. Areas of (real, current) Seattle that would be unavailable to actual pedestrians become, within the game, accessible to any player willing to negotiate its many virtual dangers. Emma Fraser has written on the meanings and uses of ruins in contemporary video games, focusing on precisely the kind of postapocalyptic playscape we traverse in *TLOU2*. She cites a developer on the practical reasons for designing levels with this narrative frame: "Modern ruins are easy landscapes to work with—they give the player freedom, a sense of atmosphere, and the chance to experience spaces that they otherwise don't have access to. Their incomplete or fragmentary forms make for far more believable play than a realistically modelled functioning city, with traffic, doorways, pedestrians, and so on (anon. 2015)."[9] Playing in the collapsed fragments of fictionalized real cities, Fraser argues, functions as both a kind of disaster tourism and an opportunity for Situationist-inflected subversive rambles across a cityscape.

Wandering through the postapocalyptic pastoral of a future modern ruin thus enables the player to reckon with the end of a whole variety of systems and ideologies, to imagine future scripts beyond those laid out by our current governing ideologies. While playing as Abby in *TLOU2* you maneuver your way down several dozen floors of a former high-rise hotel that has become a teeming nest of zombies. Basic architectural conventions like elevators and stairs have disappeared, forcing you to think creatively about what leaps you can safely make from one decaying floor to another. In this kind of play, there is potential for critique of those conventions of contemporary life that seem so permanent and intransigent outside game worlds. In a landscape at once recognizable and defamiliarized, the player can access intriguing parts of it, experiment with it, and reimagine its possibilities.

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When construed as playable future environments, "Games turn out to be fit vehicles for envisioning the 'rambunctious gardens' of a 'post-wild' future, marked by multispecies entanglements and obligations."[10]

Which is not to suggest that wandering the postapocalyptic pastoral necessarily encourages progressive experimentation or ideological utopias. Indeed, in the example just mentioned, playing experimentally within the ruin of a hotel isn't a free choice at all; it's a narrative imperative. What was to the Situationists an experimental way of engaging with cityscape becomes a mandate here, born of desperate necessity in the postapocalyptic world of *TLOU2*'s Seattle. In this sense, the gameworld does not evade the constraints and dictums presented by the city. Constraints remain, just different ones. The cityscape of the gameworld and the cityscape of reality might differ from one another, but the wanderer in each world is still compelled to move through the space in certain ways and prevented (by law, by physics, by computer code) from moving through it in others.[11]

Plenty of ideological holdovers also seem to remain after the apocalypse, and they grow more powerful in much of postapocalyptic fiction. If contemporary structures have disappeared in the postapocalyptic collapse, there's no guarantee that better structures would necessarily arise to take advantage of the blank slate, to fix what currently seems intractable. In fact, As Barbara Gurr observes, US postapocalyptic stories often feature a return to conservative norms and standards, implying that progressive ideologies are precarious luxuries, the first to be sacrificed when a catastrophe occurs. Or, more insidious, the return to conservatism in these stories argues "that our safety and ability to survive as a human collective rely upon the strength of these conservative ideologies; heteropatriarchal gender and race hierarchies survive after the apocalypse not because we are too afraid or too exhausted to create something different, but because they are our best hope, our best strength."[12] In the current world, in which we make and consume these stories, such lurking fears can pull us toward an imaginary and nostalgic past such that we wind up reproducing our cultural preoccupations and projecting them onto the future. These fictions then become co-constitutive of our current norms, such that our storytelling becomes a self-reproducing circle of fictitious history, constructed present, and apprehensive future.

A particularly virulent strain of this conservative nostalgia in postapocalyptic stories concerns the cowboy, a uniquely American mythic figure whose "brand of masculinity provides the hope (and shape) of the future,

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echoing, reproducing, and validating the mytho-history of nineteenth-century manifest destiny doctrine."[13] Cowboys shoot guns and gallop their horses into the sunset all over the postapocalyptic pastoral, and Ellie takes over this mantle from Joel in *TLOU2*. Pérez-Latorre describes the postapocalyptic video game cowboy as "a pioneer galloping through the wilderness in austere or precarious conditions yet at the same time towards a wide-open horizon of individual freedom and the conquest of new frontiers."[14] Culturally, some of us seem convinced (or inescapably reminded) that the values of hypermasculinity, prized in male and female characters alike, will return after the apocalypse with a literal bang.[15]

Beyond his authoritative fulfillment of hypermasculine norms, the cowboy figure suggests a particularly White and colonialist narrative of the US West—namely, that it belongs to (indeed, is the manifest destiny of) the White settler. In the wake of postcolonial discourses that have rightfully supplanted the heroic supremacy of the nineteenth-century cowboy, Gurr argues, the postapocalyptic cowboy narrative "open[s] the frontier once again for White, heterosexual, able-bodied men to carve out the future of the human race."[16] Gurr reads the absence (and the carefully constructed shadow presence) of Native Americans in postapocalyptic twenty-first-century stories as indicative of "the settler colonialist logic embedded in the mytho-history of the American frontier," which "requires not only that Native Americans be relegated to a shadow narrative via their absence from the land (and the stories told about the nation), but that they be kept there by the cowboy's dominance."[17]

Postapocalyptic landscapes in video games thus provide the White cowboy with yet another chance to conquer the frontier and "protect" it from any number of dangers that threaten its security (Native American stand-ins, outer-space aliens, ecological devastation, roving bands of cannibals), while promulgating the narrative that straight White men are the truly heroic victims of aggressive adversaries. This perspective shift, as Salter and Blogett note, occurs quite frequently in science-fiction games where such men "are often presented as marginalized . . . literally, [they inhabit] game worlds where white men are a persecuted 'minority.' "[18] To give a classic example from a much-beloved game, when everyman hero of *Half-Life* Gordon Freeman fights back against the aliens attacking his homeland, his violence reads as righteous and defensive. This tradition can be traced back to the early days of European science fiction, when the genre partially

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emerged as a reframing of the colonial violence that European powers were actively perpetrating, imagining it instead as violence that White people were suffering in fantasy worlds.[19] H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1897) features a Martian invasion of Britain and casts the British in the position of the colonized, explicitly equating the fictive murder of vulnerable Earthlings to the actual, horrifically nonfictional genocide of Tasmanians perpetrated by European colonists earlier in the nineteenth century.[20]

Thus, by keeping the White cowboy narratively front and center, postapocalyptic cowboy stories obfuscate the actual historical apocalypses that occurred for native peoples around the globe after the invasion of White Europeans. As Native American studies professor Cutcha Risling Baldy writes, *The Walking Dead* has come to serve as entry point for discussions in her classroom about violence against native populations and the postapocalyptic survival strategies they've adopted in the aftermath of the apocalypses of colonization.[21] Anishinaabe scholar Laurence William Gross has coined the term "Post Apocalypse Stress Syndrome" to describe Native American experience in the current era: "Along with many other Native American peoples, the Anishinaabe have seen the end of our world, which has created tremendous social stresses."[22] To shift perspective away from Eurocentrism is to honor those cultures that have been living postapocalyptically for a very long time.

TLOU2 is built on such a series of perspective shifts, in a way that attracted significant criticism upon the game's release. The heroic cowboy figure of *Part I*, Joel, ended that story by committing a crime against humanity: he murdered a hospital full of scientists working on a cure for the infection. Joel did so for a relatable reason—the scientists would have sacrificed his adopted daughter, Ellie, in their pursuit of a vaccine—but his action effectively ended any hope for a noninfected future. In *Part II*, we play first as an adult Ellie seeking vengeance against the woman who murdered Joel, only to switch perspectives halfway through and replay the same several days of events as Abby, the daughter of the surgeon Joel murdered at the end of *Part I*. Abby in turn befriends a pair of runaway Seraphite children and comes to love them as family, despite the fact that Abby belongs to the WLF, a military establishment bent on eradicating the Seraphites. When her former WLF friends burn down the wooden Seraphite town in a blaze of hellish, genocidal aggression, Abby barely escapes with her life. Justice depends on perspective; so does apocalypse. Each time the narrative twists,

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the player rewalks the same streets in the opposite direction, from the enemy's perspective.

In this series of perspective shifts—in the traversal of this landscape in one direction by one character and then in the other direction by the enemy character—we can see the landscape of the game turning from generic *space* into lived-in *place*, as our sense of this world deepens with each experience and counterexperience in a given location. The Seattle aquarium first appears in the game as nothing more than the rumored location of Ellie's primary target, Abby. When we (as Ellie) first arrive there, Abby is missing, but we still slaughter her two friends. Later, after our perspective has shifted to Abby, we reexperience the aquarium as the delightful site of Abby's playful dates with Owen, then as the homey nest Owen decorates and uses as a safe zone. The player's final scene in the aquarium is the devastating moment that we, as Abby, return from a battle to find the corpses of Owen and Mel, close friends that we (as Ellie) murdered earlier. In these shifts of perspective, the meaning of the place shifts as well, but too late. We learn its joyful history only after we, in another guise, have destroyed it. But despite the violence of each interaction—a violence that worsens and grows more desperate as we progress through the game—a powerful spatial reworking takes place. Like the pattern of a churchyard labyrinth, we walk this world in one direction and then another, deepening our understanding with each turn.

In other words, the postapocalyptic pastoral of *The Last of Us Part II* becomes the site of a strange sort of pilgrimage, one in which the final destination keeps changing. If it seems odd to read Ellie's and Abby's respective revenge quests as something so graceful as pilgrimage, consider how both young women wrestle with their inner demons by journeying—by telling themselves that a faraway act will bring them peace and then having to reckon with the fact that it doesn't. Solnit writes that "pilgrimage is one of the basic modes of walking, walking in search of something intangible . . . a spiritual journey" in which "asceticism and physical exertion" lead to "spiritual development."[23] After Ellie has returned from her first homicidal trip to Seattle, she lives peacefully on a farm with her wife and daughter but still cannot find peace. She leaves again, journeying even farther this time to chase after an intangible sense of closure. She thinks she'll achieve it if she finally kills Abby, but in her journal and her eventual decision to spare Abby after all, it becomes clear that her physical journey, rife with the

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asceticism and physical exertion Solnit notes, has indeed led to a hard-won spiritual development. For her part, Abby's journey takes her to the heart of her former enemy's home island, where she finds herself defending it against the attacks of her former allies. For both characters, the landscape serves as the ground on which a literal and spiritual journey leads to something like redemption—a narrative arc that would read much more clearly as a pilgrimage in another context.

The journey, and especially its difficulties, confers meaning on the pilgrim who eventually arrives at their end goal. "To walk there is to earn it," Solnit writes, "through laboriousness and through the transformation that comes during a journey."[24] In *Death Stranding*, Sam Porter Bridges learns this lesson quite well, and the game focuses exquisitely on the sheer laboriousness of his travel. The weight of his parcels must be carefully balanced on a body that reminds the player constantly of its materiality—in the utilization of his various excretions and in the way the player's fingers must try to keep Sam from lurching and falling as he overbalances and trips across rough terrain, physically struggling to carry this weight. The physical challenge is so overwrought that it approximates fumblecore, a game genre that uses unintuitive controls to make the execution of basic physical movements difficult. It's a genre known for physical, slapstick comedy. In *Death Stranding*, the similarity creates a strange juxtaposition between the dramatic seriousness of Sam's work and the ridiculousness his frequent skids and falls. His spiritual struggle, and the struggle of this particular postapocalyptic America, is to reconnect the isolated pockets of people—through both Sam (with his one-man-delivery-service of important packages, internet hookups, and chunks of narrative progression) and through the more meta, multiplayer aspects of the game (in which disparate players can each contribute to huge infrastructure projects like road and bridge building). The player can deposit small amounts of critical materials to different sites while traveling on foot and eventually can enjoy how the desolate, natural landscape has been transformed by paved highways, mailboxes, ropes, and bridges after many unseen other players have added their efforts. These constructions lighten and speed travel, but they also lift the player's spiritual *travail* (the etymological root from which "travel" derives), offering the player the solace of community engagement and the promise that whatever is broken about a place can be mended if we work (and walk) together.

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The game's messaging is not subtle, and neither is Hideo Kojima in his public statements about the meaning of one solitary Sam on a pilgrim's quest to reknit a broken land. On Twitter, he writes, "*Death Stranding* is a completely new type of action game, where the player's goal is to reconnect isolated cities and a fragmented society. All elements including the story and gameplay, are bound together by the theme of 'Strand', or a connection."[25] In talks, he's spoken about the player's utter loneliness within this world and how the evidence of others—invisible players passing through the same landscape—can salve that loneliness.[26] Like pilgrims leave rocks or cairns to mark their passage and to give strength to future pilgrims, the players of *Death Stranding* walk with slow, laborious effort and leave the landscape behind them slightly transformed, enmeshing themselves in a fresh network of digital, spiritual connection.

In both *Death Stranding* and *TLOU2*, walking together but separately reshapes the landscape—testifying, in video game form, to how pilgrimage can reconnect a disconnected world. I've argued elsewhere that continuous, postapocalyptic walking demonstrates unending faith, the promise of salvation, and the fundamental belief that what is broken can be mended.[27] This is one answer to the clarion call in the last chapter of *Playing Nature*, in which Chang writes, "We hardly need another book about catastrophe. What we do need is a way to carry on and find productive modes of being even in a compromised situation . . . how we make a start in the face of looming or already elapsed calamities."[28] Wandering in postapocalyptic games offers us the chance to make a start, to find a productive mode of being in the face of calamity, to take a first step in a spiritual journey, even without consciousness or intention. Wandering across a digital postapocalyptic pastoral is a pilgrimage toward the ineffable. It's not an answer, but it's a start—a literal positive step that semisecretly exists in AAA open worlds, howsoever concealed under the full force and fury of conventional action-adventure mechanics.

Finally, consider how *Death Stranding* and *TLO2* don't take place only after the apocalypse; both are set in postdeath universes, worlds in which the meaning of death has fundamentally changed. NPCs and PCs alike in each game suffer from inconvenient, purgatorial forms of immortality and narratively rewrite the meaning of death to fit with the ludological permalife that's become commonplace in video gaming. Sam cannot meaningfully die

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in *Death Stranding*; he merely enters "the Seam" before returning to his body. And Ellie, while not immune from death itself, is immune from the zombie virus that has overtaken the globe and killed so many on it. In the next section, I move from these postdeath worlds to examine some of the undead bodies that are doing this wandering, the better to understand how they fit into the mythos of eternal walkers from time immemorial.

Endless Wandering

One of the reasons players so enjoy open world adventure games is precisely because they offer the prospect of endless wandering. The whole world anticipates you, seeded with both overt storylines and secret byways waiting for the player's discovery. In contemporary open world games, permadeath is rare, and so players primarily experience the pleasanter aspects of immortality—the numberless chances to fix mistakes, claim victory over one's enemies, and discover everything the world can offer. Death functions as nothing more than a metaphor for a momentary setback. PCs usually don't even realize they're immortal. They die and are reborn again and again, conveniently forgetting the repetitive death throes they suffer in the course of the player's improvement and progression.

At the end of a game, the narrative tends to conclude the PC's wandering, even as the player might gain freer access to the entire game space. After Link beats Calamity Ganon in *Breath of the Wild*, a cutscene features Link and Zelda, both filled with a sense of peace and completion. Zelda thanks Link, and the two of them watch the ghosts of the four champions disappear into the bright blue sky.[29] If they wish, the player can then return to the moment immediately before the ending battle in order to complete the various side quests and adventures they might have missed in their push toward the game's narrative conclusion at Ganon's castle.

This mirrors the postconclusion condition of *Death Stranding*. The player enjoys the ability to travel the full breadth of the world at will, without the narrative obligations that previously informed their steps and decision making. IGN's Joe Skrebels opines that "Death Stranding Finally Gets Good After Beating It," when he finds himself finally free to deliver whatever packages he likes, challenge himself with his own infrastructure-building goals, and wander the landscape with total abandon. He concludes, "Plucked out of its narrative mire, the game at the centre of Death Stranding does begin

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to feel like quite a special experiment, a surprisingly literal AAA successor to the 'Walking Simulator' popularized in the indie space."[30] The postgame of *Death Stranding* is quite clearly identifiable as a game about wandering, even for players who aren't primed to see it that way. After the narrative end, the player finally has the unconstrained chance to wander an open world forever.

But part of what's interesting about both *Death Stranding* and *TLOU2* is the way that their narrative arcs actually don't conclude with a satisfying end to the player characters' many hours of wandering. The final scene of *TLOU2* features Ellie walking away from the once-happy home (now empty) that she previously shared with her wife and son before her thirst for revenge led her to abandon them. Now she walks away again, her destination unknown and her future unclear. In the final cutscene of *Death Stranding*, Sam stands on a mountain with Lou, the infant he has just saved from annihilation and, in so doing, made enemies with the new government. Neither Sam nor Ellie enjoys a satisfying conclusion to their wandering; neither of them seems to be heading toward rest. So for the *players* of open world games, endless wandering tends not to be a curse; the ending of the game's narrative opens up a freer playground for the player's whims. But for player *characters* like Sam and Ellie, what does it mean when they can never stop wandering? They find themselves trapped in a kind of purgatory, roaming a landscape that never ends. When a narrative suggests that a character should find peace and rest, but instead the character continues to wander, it feels more zombie than superhero, more curse than blessing.

In other words, while a player is given total freedom to wander, learn, and improve in the traditionally adventuresome mode of wandering, the PC more closely resembles a virtual Wandering Jew—doomed to continue walking forever, without any hope of death or rest. An anti-Semitic European legend, the Wandering Jew is the story of a man who sneered as Jesus Christ dragged the crucifix to Calvary. When Christ paused, the Wandering Jew jeered at him to keep moving. Christ (not sounding very much like the Prince of Peace) replied, "I will, but so will you until I come again." This curse condemned the Wandering Jew to roam eternally until Judgment Day, a metaphorical expression of a Jewish people scattered into diaspora after the destruction of the Second Temple. The mythic Wandering Jew is homeless, poorly dressed, and speaks every language (but always with an

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accent). He repents and accepts baptism, but he is never shown the divine mercy of death, and his walking never ceases.[31]

Reading Sam and Ellie as cursed, wandering immortals presents less of a challenge than one might think. Both of them live in incredibly dangerous, postdeath worlds, and both of them harbor some anomalous, organic quality that protects them from the most perilous threat of the new world order. Sam is downright immortal; any death he endures simply sends him to the Seam, a purgatorial underwater space he enters after he has died, from which he can then return to the body he inhabited just before the fatal blow. Ellie *can* die from the biological realities that would kill any human, but her body carries a secret immunity to the zombie infection that has ravaged civilization. Both characters, like most other playable characters in any AAA action game, are also superheroic in their physical strength, skill, and training—qualities that semirealistically enable them to murder the scores of enemies that cross their paths. In both cases, there's significant ambivalence surrounding the ability to cheat death again and again. Ellie's immunity threatened her life (when scientists wanted to kill her to study her), beginning the domino effect of violence that cascades throughout this sequel. Ellie would have preferred to be sacrificed on the lab table; at least then, she says, her life would have had meaning. But she survived *Part I*, she continues to survive at the end of *Part II*, and she's still unhappily wandering when the credits roll.

In each character's case, an initial, damning act is missing—or, rather, that single, pivotal act has been replaced with an overarching sense of sinfulness and guilt, the cause of which is not clearly defined. Sam, haunted by pregame events, suffers under an immense weight of guilt and responsibility but without clear justification; his memories have been corrupted, or misremembered in the first place. How can he atone for acts he did not even commit or that occurred as an unavoidable result of his biology? Ellie similarly has discovered that Joel committed this enormous crime against humanity—on her behalf but without her consent—and she spends this entire second game wrestling with her guilt over Joel's act, combined with her grief over his death. Meanwhile, she slaughters hundreds more in this game, acts for which she *is* fully responsible and which she also seems unable to process or atone for. Struggling toward true repentance, both Sam and Ellie trudge forward, hoping that they're going in the right direction

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but misled by their feelings more often than not. They *feel* damned, cursed, inescapably crushed with guilt—sometimes deservedly, sometimes not.

With this sense of damnation weighing them down, both characters continue their labors, hoping their efforts will be rewarded. Solnit writes, "A pilgrimage is work, or rather labor in a spiritual economy in which effort and privation are rewarded."[32] The difference, then, between a religious pilgrimage and the cursed roaming of the Wandering Jew (or Sam or Ellie) is fundamentally a broken economic promise. The bottom has fallen out of the spiritual economy. For these eternal wanderers, there is no reward for their effort and privation; there is only the continuation of that effort and privation, that laboring in the dark.

Ellie is left with an unending pilgrimage and permanent sense of undone labor; when the game ends, she still has not accomplished the act she set out to accomplish in the prologue, and she still cannot find home and rest. But it is Sam, in particular, who evolves from a mythically cursed, damned wanderer into a late capitalist pilgrim, who walks in the service of a job that has monetized and operationalized every inch of his laboring body. He's a male parent who "plays pregnant" in order to use his child as a work improvement tool.[33] Even in his brief moments of sleep, machines remove his blood and transform it into weapons against the undead. His sweat, urine, and feces are taken to be made into bombs and then returned to him. Whenever Sam sits down outside, even for a moment, he castigates himself for resting, muttering to himself, "That's enough sitting around doing nothing." Sam can be read as a fully interpellated gig economy worker who feels immense guilt for every moment he spends at rest. For Sam, original sin in the Christian sense has turned into late capitalist precarity. He's an UberEats deliveryman after the apocalypse, and however hard he's working, it's never enough. In its most extreme articulation, we see Sam in the Seam, swimming around and reclaiming all the cargo he has recently lost. A helpful hint pops up to tell the player that lost cargo sometimes appears in the Seam, and we can grab it before reentering Sam's body if we are quick. Sam's existence is so oriented around his work that he continues working even while he is technically dead.[34]

In Sam, we see most clearly the inevitable intersection of the themes of death and late capitalism, and a response to the questions posed in the Introduction about the ways each of them functions in wandering play. If

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wandering games provoke unproductive, contemplative, anticapitalist play, how can this mode be integrated into the highly commercial paradigm of a AAA game? By presenting this endless meandering as a curse, a damnation to eternal purgatory. Sam wanders endlessly across the postapocalyptic pastoral, unable to die, unable to stop working, beset with an eternity of purgatorial pilgrimages from one end of America to the other.

This is, at core, his function: to stitch America back together, step by step. In this, he again takes on the traditional role of a pilgrim, for embarking on a pilgrimage means putting one's body into spiritual conversation with the ground one covers. In starting this conversation, the pilgrim acknowledges and manifests the physical nature of spiritual things. "Seen theologically," Garnette Cadogan writes, "walking is an act of faith. Walking is, after all, interrupted falling. We see, we listen, we speak, and we trust that each step we take won't be our last, but will lead us into a richer understanding of the self and the world."[35] Using their own spirituality as a conduit, the pilgrim infuses meaning into the ground they traverse. The earth itself becomes holy; a subversive take, as it "suggests that the whole world may potentially be holy and that the sacred can be underfoot rather than above."[36]

This chapter contends that big-budget AAA games can also be analyzed through the lens of wandering. When we do so, what emerges is the notion that these games are, under the surface, digital pilgrimages—attempts to walk our way into a spiritually meaningful experience, ebullient violence be damned.

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8 Conclusion

This book has explored the meaning of wandering in a variety of games that emerged in the shadow of the Walking Simulator. The Introduction defined Walking Simulators as exploratory, nonviolent video games without points, goals, or tasks, in which the undying, third-person player character (PC) wanders around a narratively rich space. In Walking Sims, everything extraneous—enemies, goals, targets, points, NPCs—has been stripped away, leaving behind little besides the walk itself. Within gamer culture, this design choice seemed to transform such games into something else, something that (perhaps) was not quite a "real game." But as this book argues, the Walking Sim's conceptual and cultural prehistory as an art form dates back centuries and includes figures from the flâneur to the Wandering Jew, Tristram Shandy to Marina Abramović, the protest marcher to the religious pilgrim. The Walking Simulator inherited this lineage, adapted it patchily to the purposes of fun and subversion, and provoked a fraught backlash.

As a game mechanic, wandering has a tendency to fade into the background. Players and player characters errantly roam around video game landscapes, both figuratively and literally. How and why do we do it? What does it mean? How does the experience tap into cultural narratives, and which ones? In the preceding chapters, different preoccupations surrounding wandering have come to the fore as I've considered each game and brought in different sets of relevant discourses to explicate it. By asking in each instance *What does wandering mean in this game?*, we can see how those multifaceted meanings come together, resonate with other art forms and eras, and reflect some of the preoccupations of our contemporary moment.

Future work could take this research in several directions. I'll highlight only two: analyzing other works through the theorization of wandering

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games and analyzing a single core mechanic across several genres. First, I hope this research further attunes game designers, players, and scholars to the many possibilities of the wandering ludic body. Beyond being the most utilitarian mode of transit in games, wandering—of a character, a player, a story, a language, or any other aspect of a game—becomes a transcendent window into our mercurial desires and the convoluted, inefficient routes we take to try and reach them. I hope this project has convinced its readers that the wandering elements of a game are saying something important about humanity's roving heart, where they perhaps previously saw player characters' roaming as simply the most practical way to expose the flashier aspects of gameplay: the puzzles, the murders, the hidden treasures in smashable urns. The works I chose to highlight have proven interesting to consider as wandering games, but many others could also be analyzed through this lens.[1]

Second, this research has exposed the critical potential of analyzing a single core mechanic across a wide variety of games. While few ludic mechanics are as foundational or widespread as "wandering," several other mechanics like "shoot," "jump," and "eat" appear in most genres and could serve a similar function to "wander" in a different project. By situating one common mechanic within some of its cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts, this style of game scholarship points toward new possibilities for makers and thinkers alike. Doing so also uncovers a productive clash between categorization in gaming (the genre) and categorization in academia (the discipline). Traditional video game genres were instantiated and marketed mostly for commercial purposes—as killer apps in various console wars, as ways to bolster a certain platform, or as digital products intended to highlight a new technology. As such, game *genre* is not the only useful category for humanistic game *scholarship*, and sometimes it even blocks us from realizing the similarities among certain aspects of games in different ludic genres. Such a focus on digital genre categorization has also sheared off nondigital games (for example, card, board, tabletop, improv, sport) from comparative consideration, leading to projects that focus heavily on one arena but limited scholarship that draws them all into conversation with one another.

The conclusions drawn from this research are important for several reasons. First, by situating contemporary games within the tradition of wandering thought, this project helps us see why the elements of the Walking Sim emerged the way they did, provoked the backlash they did, and have

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percolated throughout the gaming industry, including at the AAA level. In so doing, this research responds to the "it's just a game" thread of anti-intellectualism in gaming—those who see video games as purely technical feats of software engineering and who may therefore be less likely to recognize their precursors, implications, or contexts. The tech industry is notorious for claiming to have invented ideas that in fact have a lengthy cultural history.[2] Such false claims mean that digital games as an art form can appear to have sprung out of nowhere, sui generis, to those who create and play them, when they actually have evolved from the intersection of thinking in a variety of fields. Reclaiming that intellectual history matters, not least because it helps us see why a movement or new genre emerges. If the Walking Sim made such a splash, it is in part because the intellectual history behind it stretches back to Scheherazade.

Second, all four conceptual throughlines of this book—work, death, gender, and colonialism—experienced some serious upheaval during 2020, the intense year in which I wrote most of it. *Work* and *death* were particularly interesting threads, as they suggested how players use games to exorcise their complicated feelings about both topics, and 2020 helped to demonstrate dramatically how intertwined they are. In wandering games, anxieties about twenty-first-century work—its centrality, its low pay, its boringness, its meaningfulness (or meaninglessness), its uselessness—get replicated, resisted, remade into fantasies, and reformed into a pathway to spiritual transcendence. Playful work is put to serve many (sometimes contradictory) functions: it becomes an excuse to care and grieve, it eases the player into the late capitalist imperative to love one's labor, and it helps players grapple with the fact that their work has become some combination of identity, orientation, perspective shift, curse, and calling. The concept of work in this project thus updates and reimagines (for the context of twenty-first-century American late capitalism) Aarseth's field-defining notion in 1997's *Cybertext* that ergodic texts are those that require nontrivial effort to traverse.[3] If digital games distinguish themselves from printed texts by the effort and participation—the *work*—of the player, then what does it mean for players to do that work in 2020, when a player might feel quite anxious about their work, their play, and the crossover between the two?

Relatedly, the death investigation began because I was interested in how, in Walking Simulators and in archival adventuring more broadly, an

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undying player explores a dead, haunted world. If video games famously ground themselves in repetitive cycles of dying and reviving, then we could think of wandering games as attempts to evade that cycle, attempts that might succeed in avoiding death itself for the player character but that then cause the PC to fall prey to grim fates more complicated (and sometimes worse) than death: the bare life of the laborer under late capitalism, the guilt and despair of total planetary destruction, the purgatorial misery of a cursed eternal life. And yet, in the struggle to avoid these fates, the wanderer can find bits of profound truth and beauty—or at least move in that direction.

These conclusions also illustrate how twenty-first-century gaming has evolved into a complicated middle age: played by more adults than children and imbued with deep philosophical questions about meaning, imperfection, and mortality. They are messy, ambitious, and confident in their uncertainty and ambivalence. This middle-aging is consistent across other findings in game studies. For instance, consider the phenomenon of dad games in the 2010s: cross-genre games in which a paternal player character cares for his children, such as *The Walking Dead*, *The Last of Us*, *God of War, Heavy Rain*, and *Octodad: Dadliest Catch*—works that inspired a new focus on the maturing male player/developer. The male child who grew up playing Nintendo in the early 1990s now found himself grappling with the joyful challenges of fatherhood, and he wanted his gameplay to grow up alongside him. If the prevalence of dad games showed us that gamers wanted their play to reflect their current preoccupations, so do wandering games reflect the preoccupations of a Brené-Brown-style midlife reckoning.[4] Wandering games give us the chance to walk our imperfect way toward transcendence—sometimes while offering us pleasant distractions along the way, sometimes not. As digital ludic art matures into middle age, it makes sense that it would take such contemplative steps forward.

But it also makes sense that this kind of contemplation isn't comfortable, which is why it's so often concealed behind a plethora of interactive bells and whistles. One of the results of this book is therefore a revised idea of what might be happening on an emotional level in video games that are ostensibly about other things—like fighting enemies, collecting treasures, or accomplishing lists of tasks. I began this book to look closely at the way wandering works in games that are not obviously about wandering. Although the wandering (literal or metaphorical) almost always exists in

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the ludic background, we usually take it as background. But when we see the wandering as the main point rather than as a utilitarian mechanic to get us from one place to another, we begin to see the spiritual core within an art form that prides itself on technique, speed, and precision. RPGs emerge as enchanted gig economies in which adventure and creativity actually hold their meaning for the yearning creative spirit. Postapocalyptic AAA games come into focus as cursed, twenty-first-century digital pilgrimages. The parts of games that typically fade into the background reflect our most everyday—and our deepest—desires for meaning, contentment, and purpose.

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Notes

Chapter 1

1. Dave Jamieson, "The Life and Death of an Amazon Warehouse Temp: What the Future of Low-Wage Work Really Looks Like," *Huffington Post*, 2014, https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/life-and-death-amazon-temp/.

2. See Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1956).

3. I understand colonialism by Catherine Hall's definition: the "pattern of exploration and 'discovery,' of settlement, of dominance over geographically separate 'others,' which resulted in the uneven development of forms of capitalism across the world and the destruction and/or transformation of other forms of social organization and life." Catherine Hall, "Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial, Thinking the Empire," in *Cultures of Empire: A Reader. Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5. Following Heller and McElhinny's breakdown of the following distinctions, colonialism encompasses both overseas colonialism (in which the colonizer exploits natural resources and human labor from the colony) and settler colonialism (in which foreigners enter and occupy a location before eventually claiming to own the land they've occupied). I use *colonialism* and *imperialism* interchangeably, following Heller and McElhinny, although some scholars use *colonialism* for formal political sovereignty and *imperialism* for broader structures of oppression that include political sovereignty. *Decolonization* describes the process through which people claim their own sovereignty and declare formal independence from their oppressors, although the structures of power that underpinned the formal colonial relationship never disappear overnight. Finally, *postcolonialism* either names the time period after decolonization or evokes the complex societal effects left in the wake of colonization within the cultures of the formerly colonized. *Postcolonial* can also refer to entities or discourses that show an awareness of the effects of colonialism. See Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History*

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(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 30–31, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mit/detail.action?docID=5123493.

4. See Anne Helen Petersen, "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation," *BuzzFeedNews*, January 5, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work.

5. See John Fiske and Jon Watts, "Video Games: Inverted Pleasuresm," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (1985), https://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/serial/AJCS/3.1/Fiske.html; Charles Bernstein, "Play It Again, Pac-Man," *Postmodern Culture* 2, no. 1 (1991), http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.991/pop-cult.991; Julian Stallabrass, "Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games," *New Left Review* 1, no. 198 (1993), https://newleftreview.org/issues/I198/articles/julian-stallabrass-just-gaming-allegory-and-economy-in-computer-games; Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Grieg de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2003); Carly Kocurek, "Coin-Drop Capitalism: Economic Lessons from the Video Game Arcade," in *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History*, ed. M. J. P. Wolf (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012); Seth Giddings, "Accursed Play: The Economic Imaginary of Early Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 7 (2018): 765–783, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018755914; Paolo Ruffino, "The End of Capitalism: Disengaging from the Economic Imaginary of Incremental Games," *Games and Culture* 16, no. 2 (2019), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1555412019886242.

6. Fiske and Watts, "Video Games."

7. Stallabrass, "Just Gaming," 104.

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36. Carroll, "'Play You Must,'" 37.

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38. Two authors make the point that each space represents a day of the trip, not a geographic location, in such a way that time and space are combined conceptually: Dennis Janzen, "'Good by Phileas!' Zwei Weltreisespiele um 1900," *AugenBlick. Marburger Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft* 53 (2012): 54, https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/2538, and Edlie Wong, "Around the World and across the Board: Nellie Bly and the Geography of Games," in *American Literary Geographies. Spatial Practice and Cultural Production 1500–1900*, ed. Martin Brückner and Hsuan L. Hsu (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 302.

39. Interestingly, Wagner's opera *Parsifal* debuted in Germany two years before Meier published this game, and it could have been an influence on the idea of space becoming time. *Parsifal* was a national and international cultural phenomenon, telling the story of a grail knight on an extremely long pilgrimage. Themes of wandering are everywhere in the work, and many of the audience members enacted something like a spiritual pilgrimage to travel to Bayreuth for the performance. See Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2007). The premiere production also contained a famous special effect that accompanied the lyric, "You see, my son, here time becomes space": two characters walked in slow motion onstage while a landscape painted on a canvas, strung on rollers, moved behind them as though the space were moving as well. Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 110–113. This made a huge impression on its 1882 audience, and it's entirely possible that Meier was aware of this notion of time becoming space while he was designing a board game in which space becomes time. That said, Meier's was not the first goose game in which spaces symbolize days rather than places, and the source

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material invites the change in design so strongly that the Wagner connection is more likely a coincidence and evidence of a shared zeitgeist than a clear-cut artistic influence.

40. Thanks to Thomas M. Malaby for pointing this out.

Chapter 6

1. Julie Muncy, "Heaven's Vault Is a Rare Videogame about the Art of Translation," *Wired*, April 22, 2019, https://www.wired.com/story/heavens-vault-review/; Andrew Reinhard, "The Archaeology of *Heaven's Vault*," *Archaeogaming*, April 16, 2019, https://archaeogaming.com/2019/04/16/the-archaeology-of-heavens-vault/; Mieke Dix, "Review—Heaven's Vault," *For Science, You Monster*, April 16, 2019, https://for-science-you-monster.com/tag/heavens-vault/; Emily Short, "Heaven's Vault (inkle)," *Emily Short's Interactive Storytelling*, July 23, 2019, https://emshort.blog/2019/07/23/heavens-vault-inkle/. For another reading of the game, see Megan Condis's explication of *Heaven's Vault* as a powerful ludic illustration of Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence—a slowly unfolding environmental catastrophe, taking place over a geologic timescale. Megan Condis, "Sorry, Wrong Apocalypse: *Horizon Zero Dawn*, *Heaven's Vault*, and the Ecocritical Videogame," *Game Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020), http://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/condis.

2. Catherine Hill, "Translating Truth: Heaven's Vault and Its Message to Gamers," *e Geek Anthropologist*, April 28, 2020, https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2020/04/28/translating-truth-heavens-vault-and-its-message-to-gamers/.

3. Monica Heller and Bonnie McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism: Toward a Critical History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017). See also Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territory, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

4. Writing after the disillusion of the Situationist International, Michel de Certeau connected walking and talking as mirroring forms of resistance: "The act of walking is to the urban system what enunciation (the speech act) is to language or to the system of available utterances." Walking, he argues, is an "appropriation of the topographical system by the pedestrian" and "a spatial realization of place (as the speech act is a sonorous realization of language)." Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 180.

5. See Melissa Kagen, "The Wanderer as Soldier: Robert Walser's Der Spaziergang, Switzerland in World War I, and Digression as Occupation," *German Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2016): 36–50.

6. Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparallelled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter:*

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On Being Human as Praxis, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89.

7. inkle, "Heaven's Vault," April 16, 2019, https://www.inklestudios.com/heavens vault/.

8. Jon Ingold has written that the inspiration was the ancient Roman Empire. Jon Ingold, "How Ancient Rome Inspired the Diverse World of Heaven's Vault," *PlayStation.Blog*, April 16, 2019, https://blog.playstation.com/archive/2019/04/16/how-ancient-rome-inspired-the-diverse-world-of-heavens-vault/.

9. The uses of language in the game, in other words, range across all four of Astrid Ensslin's categories of functional ludostylistics: ludological, ludonarratological, ludosemiotic, and medial. Ensslin, Literary Gaming (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 53–54.

10. This intersection between high-tech and cultural competency is also reminiscent of the field of ethnocomputing, which argues that "an understanding of the cultural dimensions of computing can enrich the disciplinary self-understanding of computer science at large." Matti Tedre and Ron Eglash, "Ethnocomputing," *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 93.

11. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

12. Florian Cramer, "Language," in *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, ed. Matthew Fuller (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 170.

13. See Alan Sondheim, ed., "Codework," *American Book Review* 22, no. 6 (September/October 2001); Florian Cramer, *Words Made Flesh: Code, Culture, Imagination* (Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2005); Rita Raley, "Interferences: Net. Writing and the Practice of Codework," *Electronic Book Review* (September 8, 2002): http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/interferences-net-writing-and-the-practice-of-codework/.

14. Bonnie Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 211, http://www.jstor.com/stable/27667485.

15. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 211.

16. Heller and McElhinny, *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism*, 243.

17. Urciuoli, "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace," 211.

18. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

19. Wynter argues we must "collectively give humanness a different future, itself historically chartered by that past." Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species?" 73.

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20. That said, I do not mean to elide the boundaries between discourses of or from one marginalized group and another. Lillvis notes how Malini Johar Schueller, Chela Sandoval, Jasbir K. Puar, and Abby Wilkerson have all critiqued Donna Haraway's tendency to blur differences between groups of women of color, theorizing individuals from multiple groups "solely on the basis of their shared outsider status" (Kristen Lillvis, *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017], 119). Aliya is a woman of color, but she does not necessarily read as being of African descent. Visually, the Middle East and North Africa are the clearest aesthetic referents in *Heaven's Vault*, and linguistically, Ancient shares visual characteristics of Arabic. This is not, in other words, a work of art that explicitly draws from Afrofuturism or Black postmodernism in its aesthetics, and while *Heaven's Vault* takes place in a setting beyond the universe of Earth and these references are therefore not situated anywhere within Terran geography, they remain clear enough sources of inspiration to be interpreted with some level of geographic and cultural specificity.

21. Katherine McKittrick, ed., "Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?" in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, 123 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

22. See Jessica Famularo, "How Inkle Developed Its Own Ancient Language for *Heaven's Vault*," *Gamasutra*, April 17, 2019, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/340917/How_Inkle_developed_its_own_ancient_language_for_Heavens_Vault.php.

23. Sara Ahmed, "Happy Futures," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 160–198, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392781-006; Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn, trans. Arianna Bove, Melinda Cooper, Erik Empson, Giuseppina Mecchia Enrico, and Tiziana Terranova (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Ghassan Hage, "On the Side of Life: Joy and the Capacity of Being: Interview with Ghassan Hage," in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, ed. Mary Zournazi (New York: Routledge, 2002): 150–171; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013); David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*; Susana Narotzky and Niko Besnier, "Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. S9 (2014): https://doi.org/10.1086/676327; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2011); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2013).

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24. Lillvis, *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, 8. See also Marleen S. Barr, ed., *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008). Ytashs L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

25. See Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003), 293.

26. Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 63–64.

27. Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 66–67.

28. Ian Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic,'" *PMC* 8, no. 1 (1997): http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.997/baucom.997.

29. Fubara-Manuel, "Scaping the Border: On Black Migrant Geographic Agency in Gamescapes," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 70. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. B. Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

30. Baucom, "Charting the 'Black Atlantic.'"

Chapter 7

1. Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," ed. Lawrence Grossberg, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 149.

2. Alenda Chang, *Playing Nature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 190.

3. La Llorona, a Mexican legendary figure who is said to have drowned her children after learning of her husband's infidelity, "is often described as a lost soul, doomed to wander the earth forever." The myth's origins trace back to the Aztec goddesses Ciuacoatl and Chalchiuhtlicue. Amy Fuller, "The Evolving Legend of La Llorona," *History Today* 65, no. 11 (2015): 39.

4. Greg Garrard, "Worlds without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy," *SubStance* 41, no.1 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2012.0001.

5. See Melissa Kagen, "Zombie Parsifal: Undead Walkers and Postapocalyptic Stagings," *Opera Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbx022.

6. See more on the relationship between zombie infestations and cities in Antonio Sanna, "Consumerism and the Undead City: The Silent Hill and Resident Evil Films," in *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, ed. Laura Hubner, Marcus Leaning, and Paul Manning (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 56.

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7. Sarah Juliet Lauro, "Afterword: Zombie (R)evolution," in *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, ed. Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011): 235.

8. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2007).

9. Emma Fraser, "Awakening in Ruins: The Virtual Spectacle of the End of the City in Video Games," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 8, no. 2 (2016): 177–196, https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.8.2.177_1.

10. Chang, *Playing Nature*, 192, citing Emma Marris, *The Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post–Wild World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

11. See Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics, and Materiality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), for a fascinating discussion of wandering through industrial ruins as a way of playfully renegotiating space and decay.

12. Barbara Gurr, "Introduction," in *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*, ed. Barbara Gurr (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

13. Barbara Gurr, "Masculinity, Race, and the (Re?)Imagined American Frontier," in *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*, ed. Barbara Gurr (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 31.

14. Óliver Pérez-Latorre, "Post-Apocalyptic Games, Heroism and the Great Recession," *Game Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019), http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre.

15. For an analysis of a wandering game that subverts this notion of cowboy hypermasculinity on the western American frontier, see Melissa Kagen, "Walking, Talking and Playing with Masculinities in Firewatch," *Game Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/kagen.

16. Gurr, "Masculinity," 31.

17. Gurr, "Masculinity," 34.

18. Anastasia Salter and Bridgett Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 75.

19. John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 20–21: "Many of the repetitive motifs that coalesced into the genre of science fiction represent ideological ways of grasping the social consequences of colonialism, including the fantastic appropriation and rationalization of unevenly distributed colonial wealth in the homeland and in the colonies, the racist ideologies that enabled colonialist exploitation, and the cognitive impact of radical cultural differences on the home culture."

20. H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (Project Gutenberg eBook, 1992 [1898]), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36/36-h/36-h.htm: "And before we judge of [the

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Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?"

21. Cutcha Risling Baldy, "On Telling Native People to Just 'Get Over It' or Why I Teach about the Walking Dead in My Native Studies Classes . . . *Spoiler Alert!*" (November 12, 2019), https://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/on-telling-native-people-to-just-get-over-it-or-why-i-teach-about-the-walking-dead-in-my-native-studies-classes-spoiler-alert.

22. Lawrence William Gross, "The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion," *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2002): 437, https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2003.0038. See also Gurr, "Introduction," 7.

23. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 45.

24. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 50.

25. Hideo Kojima, "Twitter/ @HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN: Playstation.com/deathstranding," May 29, 2019, 12:01 p.m., https://twitter.com/HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN/status/1133765190921670657.

26. Matthew Gault, "'We're Not Thinking about Others': What Hideo Kojima Wants You to Learn from *Death Stranding*," *Time Magazine*, November 8, 2019, https://time.com/5722226/hideo-kojima-death-stranding/.

27. Melissa Kagen, "Zombie *Parsifal*: Undead Walkers and Postapocalyptic Stagings," *Opera Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (2017): 122–139, https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbx022.

28. Chang, *Playing Nature*, 188–190.

29. A later hidden cutscene plays when all side quests in the game have been accomplished. Zelda intriguingly tells Link that their adventures still aren't over: "Although Ganon is gone for now, there is still so much more for us to do." GameSpot, "*Zelda: Breath of The Wild*'s Hidden Ending Cutscene," April 18, 2017, https://youtu.be/p2Wjiy2S0_c.

30. Joe Skrebels, "Opinion: Death Stranding Finally Gets Good after Beating It: Death Stranding's Endgame Is What It Should Have Been All Along," *IGN*, January 13, 2020, https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/11/20/opinion-death-stranding-finally-gets-good-after-beating-it.

31. See Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes, eds., *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

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32. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 46.

33. See Korine Powers, "Playing Pregnant in *Death Stranding*," paper presented at the Electronic Literature Organization Conference, Orlando, July 16–19, 2020, https://stars.library.ucf.edu/elo2020/asynchronous/talks/19.

34. Paragraph paraphrased from Melissa Kagen, "Worries of a Patriarchy," Review of *Death Stranding*, *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2020).

35. Garnette Cadogan, "Walking While Black," *Literary Hub* (2016): https://lithub.com/walking-while-black/.

36. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, 49.

Chapter 8

1. A few examples: you could read the repeating twenty-two minutes of *Outer Wilds* as an expansion of *Gone Home*'s archival adventure model from a single-family home to a doomed but comfy solar system, an expansion that opens up intriguing connections—Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, the push and pull between home and wandering, and the idea that cozy adventure games combine the best of both. Or you could read game mods focusing on migration and border-crossing through work like Philip Penix-Tadsen's edited volume, *Videogames of the Global South*, considering a mod as a wandering, migratory mode, beginning with the transformation of *Half-Life* (the Ur-text of *Dear Esther* and *The Stanley Parable*) into *Escape from Woomera*. I started to do something along those lines in an article (see Kagen, "Glory to Trumpland! Critically Playing Border Games," *gamevironments* 11 [2019]: 23–64, http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de). Another exciting prospect—the way that the "Discovery Tour" mode in *Assassin's Creed* or the "Hero's Path" DLC in *Breath of the Wild* have emerged as a mode of educational gamification in AAA development. See "Discovery Tour Mode of Assassin's Creed: Origins," *Ubisoft*, February 23, 2021, https://support.ubisoft.com/en-gb/Article/000062699/Discovery-Tour-Mode-of-Assassins-Creed-Origins.

2. See Adrian Daub, *What Tech Calls Thinking: An Inquiry into the Intellectual Bedrock of Silicon Valley* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

3. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

4. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010).

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